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HUSBANDS AND LOVERS

Nineteen Dialogues

HUSBANDS AND LOVERS

Nineteen Dialogues

by

FRANZ MOLNAR

ENGLISH TEXTS BY

BENJAMIN GLAZER



BONI AND LIVERIGHT

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WITHDRAWN

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A MATTER OF HUSBANDS

A MATTER OF HUSBANDS

The scene is a drawing room in the apartment of the Famous Actress at five in the afternoon. For a long time the Earnest Young Woman has been sitting there, poised nervously on the edge of a gilt chair. Now the Famous Actress enters from her boudoir.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

You wished to see me?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[gulps emotionally]

Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

What can I do for you?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[throws out both arms beseechingly]

Give me back my husband!

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Give you back your husband!

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

[only stares at her in speechless bewilderment]

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

You are wondering which one he is. . . . He is a blond man, not very tall, wears spectacles. He is a lawyer, your manager's lawyer. Alfred is his first name.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Oh! I have met him . . . yes.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

I know you have. . . . I implore you, give him back to me!

[There is a long pause]

FAMOUS ACTRESS

You mustn't mistake my silence for embarrassment. . . . I am at a loss because . . . I don't quite see how I can give you back your husband when I haven't got him to give.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

But you just admitted you knew him.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

But that scarcely implies that I have taken him away from you. Of course I know him. He drew

up my last contract. And it seems to me I have seen him once or twice since then . . . back-stage. A rather nice-spoken, fair-haired man. . . . Did you say he wore spectacles?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

I don't remember him with spectacles.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

He took them off. He wanted to look his best to you. He is in love with you. He never takes them off when I'm around. He doesn't care how he looks when I'm around. He doesn't love me. . . . I implore you, give him back to me!

FAMOUS ACTRESS

If you weren't such a very foolish young woman I should be angry with you. Wherever did you get the idea that I have taken your husband from you?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

He sends you flowers . . . all the time.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

That's not true.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

It is.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

It isn't. He never sent me a flower in all his life.
Did he tell you he had?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

No! I found out at the florist's. The flowers
are sent to your dressing room three times a week
and charged to him.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

That's a lie.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Do you mean to say that *I* am lying?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

I mean to say that someone is lying to you.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[fumbles in her bag for a letter]

And what about this letter?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Letter?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

He wrote it to you. And he said . . .

FAMOUS ACTRESS

He wrote it to me? Let me see. . . .

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

No. I'll read it to you. [*Opens it and reads mournfully*] "My darling, shan't be able to call for you at the theatre tonight. Urgent business. A thousand apologies. Ten thousand kisses.—Alfred."

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Oh!

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

I found it on his desk this morning. He probably meant to send it to the theatre by messenger. But he forgot it. And I opened it. [*She weeps*]

FAMOUS ACTRESS

You mustn't cry.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[*sobbing*]

Why mustn't I? You steal my husband, and I mustn't cry! Oh, I know how little it means to you! And how easy it is for you! One night you dress like a royal princess, and the next you undress like a Greek goddess. You blacken your eyebrows and redden your lips and wax your lashes and paint your face . . . you have cosmetics and bright lights

to make you seem beautiful . . . an author's lines to make you seem witty and wise. . . . No wonder a poor, simple-minded lawyer falls in love with you. What chance have I against you in my cheap little frock, my own lips and eyebrows, my own unstudied ways? I don't know how to strut, and pose, and lure a man. I haven't got Mr. Shakespeare to write beautiful speeches for me. . . . In reality you may be more stupid than I am, but I admit that when it comes to alluring men I am no match for you.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

This is a very interesting case.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

What is?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Yours.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Mine? What do you mean?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

I mean that I have never received a flower or a letter or anything else from your husband. Tell me, haven't you and your husband been getting on rather badly of late?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Of course.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

You used to be very affectionate to each other?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

And of late you have been quite cold?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Of course! A typical case. . . . My dear, if you knew how often we actresses meet this sort of thing! It is perfectly clear that your husband has been playing this little comedy to make you jealous, to revive your interest in him.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[*dumbfounded, staring*]

Do you really think that? Do you mean to say such a thing has happened to you before?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Endless times. It happens to every actress who is moderately pretty and successful. It is one of the oldest expedients in the world, and we actresses

are such conspicuous targets for it! There is scarcely a man connected with the theatre who doesn't make use of us in that way some time or other—authors, lawyers, composers, scene designers, orchestra leaders, even the managers themselves. All they need to do to regain a wife or sweetheart's affections is invent a love affair with one of us. The wife is always so ready to believe it! Usually we don't know a thing about it, but even when it is brought to our notice we don't mind so much. At least we have the consolation of knowing that we were the means of making many a marriage happy which might otherwise have ended in the divorce courts.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

But how . . . how could I know? . . .

FAMOUS ACTRESS

[with a gracious little laugh]

There, dear, you musn't apologize. You couldn't know, of course. It seems so plausible. You fancy your husband in an atmosphere of perpetual temptation . . . in a back-stage world full of beautiful sirens without scruples or morals. One actress, you suppose, is more dangerous than a hundred ordinary women. You hate us and fear us . . . and none understands that better than your husband,

who is evidently a very cunning lawyer. And so he plays on your fear and jealousy to regain the love that you deny him. He writes me a letter and leaves it home on his desk. Trust a lawyer never to do that unintentionally. He orders flowers for me in the morning, and probably cancels the order the moment he reaches his office. By the way, hasn't he a lock of my hair?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Yes. In his desk drawer. I brought it with me.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Yes. They bribe my hair-dressers to steal from me. It is a wonder I have any hair left at all.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[happily]

Is that how he got it?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

I can't imagine how else. Tell me, hasn't he left any love-letters lying around?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[in alarm]

No.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Now don't be alarmed. I haven't written him any.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

But what made you——

FAMOUS ACTRESS

I might have if he had come to me frankly and said: "I say, Sara, will you do something for me? My wife and I aren't getting on so well. Would you write me a passionate love-letter that I can leave lying around at home where she may find it?" . . . I should certainly have done it for him. I'd have written a letter that would have made you weep into your pillow for at least a fortnight. I wrote ten like that for a very eminent playwright once. But he had no luck with them. His wife was such a proper person she returned them all to him unread.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

How clever you are! How good!

FAMOUS ACTRESS

I am neither better nor worse than any other girl in the theatre. Even though you do consider us such monsters.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

[*contritely*]

I have been a perfect fool.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Well, you do look a bit silly, standing there with tears in your eyes, and your face flushed with happiness because you have discovered that a little blond man with spectacles loves you after all. My dear, no man deserves to be adored as much as that. But then it's your own affair, isn't it?

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

Yes.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Yet I want to give you a parting bit of advice. Don't let him fool you like this again.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

He won't. Never fear!

FAMOUS ACTRESS

No matter what you may find in his pockets,—letters, handkerchiefs, my photograph. . . . No matter what flowers he sends, or letters he writes, or appointments he makes . . . don't be taken in a second time.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

You can be sure of that. And you won't say anything to him about my coming here, will you?

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Not a word. I'm rather angry with him for not having come to me frankly for permission to use my name the way he did.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

You are a dear, and I don't know how to thank you.

FAMOUS ACTRESS

Now you mustn't begin crying all over again.

EARNEST YOUNG WOMAN

You have made me so happy!

[She kisses the Famous Actress impetuously, wetting her cheek with tears, then she rushes out. The door closes behind her. There is a pause]

FAMOUS ACTRESS

[goes to the door of her boudoir, calls]

All right, Alfred. You can come in now. She has gone.

THE END

THE MAN IN THE CAB

THE MAN IN THE CAB

The scene is played in a shabby one-horse cab at half-past four in the morning. The rising sun has still the warmth of summer though tiny pennants of autumn mist are curling up from the muddy little lake around which the cab is circling.

Inside the cab sits a dishevelled young man; up on the driver's seat sits a very ragged and unshaven cabby. The young man has just staggered out of a café, and is taking the drive for a breath of fresh air before going home. The horse trots along briskly.

THE YOUNG MAN

Say, cabby, are you poor?

THE CABBY

Yes, sir.

[Turns to look at his passenger]

THE YOUNG MAN

Look where you're driving!

THE CABBY

Yes, sir.

[They are silent awhile]

THE YOUNG MAN

Have you got a wife?

THE CABBY

Two.

THE YOUNG MAN

Good for you! Any children?

THE CABBY

Three by my one wife; four by the other. That's eight altogether. Then there's one I had long ago, when I was only a cabby.

THE YOUNG MAN

Aren't you a cabby now?

THE CABBY

No, sir. The cab belongs to me.

THE YOUNG MAN

This old rattle-trap belongs to you? And also this animated sausage that pulls it?

THE CABBY

All belongs to me. I own four cabs and eight horses. And two coupés for funerals. And I have a white hearse with a glass coffin for children's funerals. It all belongs to me, even if I do wear old

clothes. You don't suppose I get dressed up in good clothes to drive at night, do you? Why, even this cab is only a night cab.

THE YOUNG MAN

Then you are not poor at all, you old fraud. Why do you say you're poor?

THE CABBY

I own a house in Elias Street. And I own an empty lot, too. Oh, I'm not a beggar—just a poor man. When you have to take orders you're poor.

[There is a pause]

THE YOUNG MAN

Is your horse going all right, sir?

THE CABBY

Me?

THE YOUNG MAN

Sure.

THE CABBY

I didn't think you were talking to me because you said 'sir.'

THE YOUNG MAN

Certainly I call you 'sir.' Why, you're a property owner and a man of affairs. . . . Say, I'd like to get up on the box and drive this cab a while.

THE CABBY

If you like.

THE YOUNG MAN

People will laugh at us.

THE CABBY

What for?

THE YOUNG MAN

Because the two of us will be sitting on the box and nobody inside the cab. But I'll tell you what we can do. You sit inside the cab, as if you were the passenger and I the driver. Will you?

THE CABBY

All right.

[The cab stops. The cabby sits in the cab and the young man climbs up on the driver's seat and takes the reins. He whips the horse briskly and the cab is off again]

THE CABBY

Can I smoke?

THE YOUNG MAN

Certainly. You are the passenger now. Where'd you like to go?

THE CABBY

Around to the reservoir and back.

THE YOUNG MAN

Yes, sir. Get up!

[He whips up the horse. They ride a long time in silence. Suddenly the cabby speaks]

THE CABBY

Say, cabby, are you rich?

[The young man turns and looks back at him]

THE YOUNG MAN

What? What's that?

THE CABBY

Look where you're driving. I asked whether you're rich.

THE YOUNG MAN

[shrugs his shoulders]

Yes.

[There is a pause]

THE CABBY

Have you got a wife?

THE YOUNG MAN

Twenty-two.

THE CABBY

Good for you! Got any children?

THE YOUNG MAN

Not one.

THE CABBY

Well, then what *have* you got?

THE YOUNG MAN

I have got a pair of white trousers, eight notes at the money lender's, three in the name of my first wife, four in my second wife's name, and one in the name of my grandfather . . . but that one is forged. That's eight altogether. I've also got a furnished room on Burg Street . . . but I've been put out of that because I haven't paid the rent for four months. I haven't got a job. Yesterday I took my silver cigarette case to the pawnshop and with what they gave me on it I bought eight bottles of beer. So I have one gulden left, and I'll have to give that to you. Now I'm going to ask my landlady to let me sleep at home one more day. Then I think I'll buy a package of phosphorus matches, dissolve them in water and drink it. But, come to think of it, I won't have enough left to buy the matches. Maybe you'll give me some back out of my gulden?

THE CABBY

Don't be a fool. Is this true, what you're telling me?

THE YOUNG MAN

It's true. One talks about it so long that at last one does it. That's how you work yourself up to it. And all the time you get less and less afraid of it. Perhaps for another week I'll talk about it . . . and then I won't be afraid any more, and I'll do it. Peacefully, very peacefully I'll leave the world; my heart will stop like a clock. But you can't understand, my dear cabby . . . you've never lain on your bed naked, weeping, with a revolver pressed close to your skin. That's so peaceful, my dear Mister Cabby. The hot tears roll down your cheeks. You press the revolver barrel hard against your ribs, so hard that you can't hear the rumble of wheels outside on the street, and then suddenly you feel as pure as a newborn babe. . . . But you must be careful not to press the trigger. . . . These stories about how you go mad and shoot yourself in a single day are fairy tales. That sort of thing comes very slowly. But you don't understand, my poor dear cabby, and, anyhow, I sold my revolver to get enough to go to the races.

THE CABBY

Have you no income?

THE YOUNG MAN

No, sir.

THE CABBY

Do you want to work for me as a driver?

THE YOUNG MAN

Gladly, sir. It's all the same to me as long as I have a room and board until I can bring myself to do it. If you want to know what I mean, Mister Cabby, I'll explain it to you. This much I can tell you: that no one should die while he is sad. Old men get tired and are glad to die at the last minute. The sick lose their desire to live. If a man jumps off a bridge he grows old during his fall. I must get from eight to ten days older so as not to cry too much while I'm dying. Nature won't let a man leave this world until she agrees that he ought to go. We ourselves can't force matters. But you're too stupid to understand what I'm talking about, my dear cabby.

THE CABBY

You will sleep in the stable and eat dinner with us. You can buy your supper for seventeen kreuzer in the little restaurant near the cab-stand.

THE YOUNG MAN

Yes, sir.

THE CABBY

Well, do you take the job?

THE YOUNG MAN

Right now.

THE CABBY

Then I won't do any more driving myself. My eyes are weak. Driving spoils your eyes on account of the dust. And why should I go blind? Who would support my two wives and my eight children? Eh?

THE YOUNG MAN

You are right.

THE CABBY

The horse's name is Rosa. Remember that. I'll tell you all the rest you have to know when we get to Elias Street.

THE YOUNG MAN

Then I won't have to pay you for this ride?

THE CABBY

Why not? For the first half hour I am entitled to seventy-five kreuzer, because you were still a passenger then. The rest you needn't pay. But I'll not take your gulden away from you. Keep it. I'll deduct the seventy-five kreuzer from your wages.

THE YOUNG MAN

Yes, sir.

[Meantime they have circled the reservoir and are back at the place where they started. The cab stops]

THE YOUNG MAN

Where would you like to go now, sir? Home?

THE CABBY

Not yet. First we must go to the feed-dealer's. Hereafter you'll know where he lives. Go ahead. Forty-two Sand Street. Stop whipping that horse or I'll knock you off the box.

THE YOUNG MAN

Yes, sir. Get up, Rosa.

[The cab proceeds. A milk wagon with two women on the driver's seat is just ahead]

THE YOUNG MAN

[shouts loudly]

Hey, there!

[Swerves to the right and laughs proudly at the women because he has passed them. But the first thrill of pride in his new calling—or something else—has wrung two hot tears from his eyes. The sun is now shining brightly, and they proceed at a lively trot. The streets are filling with people. The cab

passes a sleepy policeman. The new cabby glowers at him. They stop at the door of the feed-dealer's. The cabby gets out]

THE CABBY

Wait here. I'll be back soon.

THE YOUNG MAN

Yes, sir.

[He waits until the cabby has vanished into the store. He looks around him. Nearby a cigar store is being opened for the day. He climbs down from his box and goes into the store. Like a careful cabby he takes his whip with him]

THE WOMAN IN THE STORE

What will you have?

THE YOUNG MAN

Give me a box of matches, not the Swedish kind, but the kind with the phosphorus tips.

[His silver gulden falls ringing on the counter]

THE END

A LEAVE-TAKING

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A LEAVE-TAKING

*[On a remote path far out in the park a man
and a woman are strolling]*

SHE

And now it's over. The moment has come to part.
There is nothing else to do. So kiss my hand, and
let us part friends.

HE

As you wish.

SHE

And we need have none but the most pleasant and
kindly memories of each other. We met—and loved
—and kissed awhile—and then we grew tired of
each other. Basta!

HE

You are right.

[He kisses her hand]

SHE

Now I shall take the right-hand path. You wait
a moment and then take the one to the left. It
would be quite too awful for my husband to find us
out now, just as we are parting forever.

HE

Good-bye.

[Neither of them moves]

SHE

Why don't you go?

HE

There is something I'd like to ask you first.

SHE

What is it?

HE

I first met you at Hohen Tatra. Do you remember? You were with some women friends, wintering there without your husband. And so I didn't meet him.

SHE

I remember.

HE

We were interested in each other immediately, as you will recall, and later in Budapest our intimacy continued. Still I never met your husband.

SHE

No.

HE

Then one day you brought me a photograph of a very handsome man. You said: "I have brought

you a portrait of my husband. I thought you might want to know what he looks like." I studied the photograph carefully. The man was as handsome as Dorian Gray, as elegant as Edward VII. His hair was wavy, his eyebrows beautifully arched; he had a kind, straightforward glance and a mouth like a Greek god's. I didn't tell you, but that evening I could scarcely eat a mouthful.

SHE

I thought as much.

HE

And I couldn't sleep either. I was so madly in love with you at the time that I couldn't help making comparisons humiliating to myself. I would scan my face anxiously in the mirror. I know that I am neither good-looking nor bad-looking—just a commonplace face, the sort you see on any lieutenant. This realization troubled me and angered me. I was determined that somehow I must make myself handsome.

SHE

I noticed that.

HE

During all those sleepless nights I used to ask myself what you, who had a husband like that, could possibly see in me. "Perhaps her husband is a blockhead," I told myself. That comforted me

until, on further analysis, I had to admit that my own intelligence was nothing uncommon and, moreover, the face in the picture had every sign of wit and intellect. Less and less was I able to understand how you could possibly love me. I was jealous, jealous of the man in the picture; and gradually I began to enter into a feverish competition with that photograph.

SHE

I knew it.

HE

I had my clothes made by the best tailor. I had my hair waved. Wildly jealous of you every minute, I gave scrupulous care to every detail of my personal appearance, until, really, I began to pass for handsome. Sometimes you would tell me you were going to a ball with your husband. That always made me savage, thinking how imposing he must look in evening clothes.

SHE

I knew it.

HE

Every free moment of your time I demanded for my own. Do you remember? Once you told me your husband had gone to London on a two weeks' business trip. I scarcely left you out of my sight.

SHE

It was true. He had gone to London.

HE

And when you told me he had returned I begged you to let me meet him. You refused. I asked only for the opportunity of seeing him in the flesh. You refused. Then something happened.

SHE

What?

HE

I can confess it now. One afternoon at my apartment you dropped a note. After you had gone I picked it up and read it. It was a note to your mother saying that your husband and you had a box for the opera the following evening and that you would stop for her and take her. You had intended to send this note to your mother, but it must have dropped out of your purse at my apartment.

SHE

Really? Did I lose it in your apartment?

HE

Yes. And the next evening, of course, I went to the opera, too. And I saw you all there in your box—you, your mother—and your husband.

SHE

Did you?

HE

Is that all you have to say about it?

SHE

What do you expect me to say?

HE

Come now, don't pretend. In the opera house that night I found out—I won't say you lied to me—but that there had been a mistake. Your husband is between fifty and fifty-five years old, incredibly ugly, crooked, hairy—pardon me—but he is incredibly ugly.

SHE

Now—now——

HE

You can't deny he was your husband.

SHE

No.

HE

I made sure by hunting up someone who knew who he was.

SHE

It was my husband.

HE

Well, then, why did you play this comedy with me? Who was the handsome young man whose portrait you showed me?

SHE

I don't know. I bought the photograph in London. For a few shillings. Some English aristocrat or other, I imagine.

HE

[*puzzled*]

But why?

SHE

You've answered that question yourself. It was a little deception of mine that succeeded brilliantly. Once you started to compete with the portrait you rose fifty per cent. in worth. You improved incredibly. That picture actually made you handsome, elegant and witty. I was very much in love with you then. Hence it was a joy to me to improve your good qualities.

HE

Clever! I admit it. Yet it was typically feminine cleverness. So shortsighted, you know.

SHE

How do you mean?

HE

Because, as you see, a mere accident, a note inadvertently dropped out of a purse destroyed the entire fabric of lies. The day I saw your husband—your real husband—and knew you had lied to me I lost all impulse to make myself attractive to you. No matter what I did, I flattered myself, your husband would still be inferior to me. And gradually I began to neglect my appearance. My jealousy abated. Love itself began to cool. And finally it died. Yet, if you had not dropped that note, I am sure I would still be madly in love with you.

SHE

[softly]

And do you think a woman like me could drop a note in your apartment unless she really wanted to drop it?

HE

What do you mean?

SHE

A woman who deceives her husband is not apt to be careless about notes. Why, if I had been that careless my husband would have found me out long ago.

HE

You mean you intentionally dropped that note?

SHE

Of course.

HE

[*angrily*]

Why?

SHE

You've answered that question, too. I wanted you to see my husband and gradually cool off—until you were quite cold—because—because I hate scenes. When I grew tired of you—I dropped the note. Thereupon you lost interest in me. And so our intimacy came to a natural, peaceful, friendly end.

HE

You wanted to end it because——

SHE

Because I had already made up my mind to give the photograph of the handsome Englishman to someone else. Good-bye, dear. Don't be angry, but any man's heart can be managed like that—with a photograph and a note. Notre cœur, as Maupassant said. Good-bye.

[*Reflectively he watches her as she takes the path to the right and disappears around a turning*]

THE END

THE KEY

THE KEY

[A very cozy drawing-room. Late afternoon. The guests have gone. Only the hostess and her best friend are left. They are exchanging confidences in low tones over a farewell cup of tea]

THE FRIEND

It's the most extraordinary thing that ever happened to me. You'll never believe it.

THE HOSTESS

Of course I will.

THE FRIEND

But I simply must tell someone. And a man wouldn't understand.

THE HOSTESS

Go on.

THE FRIEND

It happened last Wednesday. But unless you are prepared to believe me, there is really no use——

THE HOSTESS

But certainly I'll believe you.

THE FRIEND

Well, at a quarter past seven last Wednesday evening I came home and, to my great surprise, found my husband there. He is never at home before half-past eight, but there he sat at the dining-room table, reading a newspaper. We kissed each other, as usual, and I reached in my bag for a handkerchief. Finding him at home before me had annoyed me a bit, and so I wasn't as careful as I might have been, for as I pulled the handkerchief out of the bag a key fell out.

THE HOSTESS

Yes.

THE FRIEND

That's just what my husband said.

THE HOSTESS

What?

THE FRIEND

"Yes." For no apparent reason he said, "Yes." I flushed. Whenever I drop something I wait for my husband to pick it up. It is a courtesy that comes so naturally to him I would never dream of stooping for anything myself. Yet now I made the unpardonable error of picking up that key. Undoubtedly I was fussed. Finding him at home had startled me; dropping the key had made me

worse; and when he said, "Yes," it quite finished me. I was perfectly certain I had aroused his suspicions and that something terrible was going to happen.

THE HOSTESS

Did it?

THE FRIEND

Yes. My husband smiled. It was a nasty smile. He didn't speak; he only looked at me. I must have appeared very guilty, for I made the mistake of keeping quiet too. Then, after what seemed to me an interminable silence, he asked in a low, cutting tone: "What key is that?"

THE HOSTESS

How awful!

THE FRIEND

"What key is that?" Imagine it! If only it had been an ordinary key. . . . But it wasn't. It shone, but not as a key shines which is old and much used. Its brilliance was blatant, bright with the mark of rasp and file . . . in short, it was glitteringly, palpably new. Now there is something reassuring, something trustworthy about an old key. An old key is like an old friend. If you look at it long and think of its associations it almost seems a living thing to you. But this key, so menacing, so un-

couth, its antecedents so obviously limited to a vulgar locksmith, its associations——

THE HOSTESS

Tell me what happened.

THE FRIEND

He said, "What key is that?" And I knew that the critical moment of my life had come, and that, whatever I answered, I was lost. Curious, but do you know what was the first thing to pass through my mind? A feeble joke I had heard when a girl. A woman who has just come from her lover's apartment is asked by her husband: "Where were you, dear?" She answers: "With my lover, darling." And the husband smiles and says admonishingly: "Don't ever do that again, my angel." It occurred to me to say to my husband: "This is the key to my lover's apartment." But the next moment I realized I should never have the assurance to carry it off with the requisite humor and lightness. No, I gave myself up for lost. Utterly. I could see no possible way out. In the thousandth part of a second I lived through all the anguish of discovery. All was over between my husband and me. For the first time I was glad there were no children. I stood there a perfect stranger to him, cast off, dishonored, friendless, alone.

THE HOSTESS

Well?

THE FRIEND

And . . . see what odious creatures we women really are. . . . I grew suddenly calm and hard. A death-like peace seemed to descend upon me. If my husband were clever he could have read it on my face. And why I said it . . . how I came to think of it, I'll never tell you . . . but . . . I was amazed to hear my own voice saying: "This key? Why, it's the key to the dining-room."

THE HOSTESS

The dining-room?

THE FRIEND

The dining-room. I could have said it was the key to the kitchen, the drawing-room, or any other room. I could have said it was the key to the reformed church. But I didn't. Some cold-blooded madness made me call it the key to the dining-room. Then I bowed my head and waited for the storm to break over me. But it didn't.

THE HOSTESS

What did?

THE FRIEND

"The dining-room," my husband repeated. "Yes," I replied, "the old key was lost and I had a new one made." He took the key out of my hand and went straight to the dining-room door. Our dining-room, as you know, has two doors. One leads to the pantry, the other to the hall. He went first to the pantry door and tried the key in the lock. It didn't fit. He looked at me. I shrugged my shoulders. He went to the other door. The door that leads to the hall. He put the key in the lock. A cold shiver ran down my back. . . . But the key fitted . . . it fitted . . . it turned the lock . . . it clicked as smoothly as if it had never been made to open another door.

THE HOSTESS

How is that?

THE FRIEND

Yvette Guilbert sings a song about just such a miracle. A miracle which sprang from the divine mercy of the Madonna who took compassion on an errant wife and at the last moment worked the miracle to save her from punishment and to set her feet again on the path of righteousness. But explain it as you will. Call it a miracle or only an extraordinary coincidence. The fact is—it happened.

THE HOSTESS

Astonishing! And what happened then?

THE FRIEND

I should think you could imagine the rest. The first part of my story was mystical, miraculous, incredible. But the rest any woman can guess. I was very indignant, of course. I raised my eyebrows and said in my most disdainful manner: "Really, your suspicions are too degrading!" . . . Never, never will he know how frightened I had been. In his masculine way, I suppose, he will draw a ponderous moral from the episode. That a man must never let a woman know he suspects her until he has the proof of her guilt in his hand. But how nearly he had the proof last Wednesday he will never know.

THE HOSTESS

What did you do then?

THE FRIEND

We sat down to dinner. And bored each other. And spoke of other things. . . . It wasn't until much later, when I was alone, that I felt the strain of it all. It was a cruel shock to my nervous system.

THE HOSTESS

You got off very luckily. I hope it will be——

THE KEY

THE FRIEND

A lesson to me?

THE HOSTESS

Yes.

THE FRIEND

Indeed it will. I shall never be so careless again. . . . Last night he came to see me.

THE HOSTESS

Who?

THE FRIEND

The man . . . whose door the key was made to fit. . . . He came and we sat chatting all alone . . . in the dining-room. And I told him—not the whole story—only that I happened to discover his key would unlock our dining-room door.

THE HOSTESS

What did he say?

THE FRIEND

He said: "I'm not interested in whether it will *unlock* the door. But will it *lock* it?"

THE HOSTESS

What?

THE FRIEND

And . . . he locked it.

THE HOSTESS

Oh! After the narrow escape you'd had! That key! The very door——

THE FRIEND

Don't be silly. What does the key matter? Or the door? After all, nothing matters . . . but appearances.

[She wraps her costly furs around her and goes]

THE END

SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING

SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING

It is seven o'clock in the evening. The last train for Budapest has just pulled out of the little rural station, and its rumbling is still audible in the distance. MARIE and ANNA, both seventeen, sit on the deserted station platform. MARIE is the daughter of a well-to-do farmer of the neighborhood. ANNA, a city girl, is her guest. Both are silent, listening gravely to the diminishing rumble of the train. A light summer breeze sways the branches of the acacia trees.

MARIE

Do you hear it any more?

ANNA

Sh-h!

[They listen intently]

ANNA

I don't hear it any more.

MARIE

I still hear it because my Victor is on it. When you are in love you hear the train much longer. Last

62 SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING

Thursday, after he went away, I heard its rumbling all night long.

ANNA

[studies the tips of her shoes meditatively]

Shall we go home?

MARIE

Yes.

[They rise and stroll leisurely toward the house]

MARIE

Wasn't Victor handsome today? Some days he is handsomer than others.

ANNA

Yes.

MARIE

His hair is like pure soft gold.

ANNA

And his voice is low and rich—like the music of a cello . . . when he wants it to be.

MARIE

Yes.

ANNA

You love him very much, don't you?

MARIE

[*with grave conviction*]

More than anything in the world.

ANNA

I know—and I don't wonder.

[*They walk on in silence. Suddenly Anna stops*]

MARIE

What's the matter.

ANNA

The top button of your blouse is undone. Wait, I'll fasten it for you.

MARIE

No—I don't want it fastened.

ANNA

Why not?

MARIE

Because it came undone while he kissed me good-bye.

ANNA

Oh!

MARIE

When I reach behind me and feel it undone—It's like—touching him—— You know what I mean.

ANNA

[*softly*]

I know. Like a souvenir he has left behind him.

MARIE

Yes. He left his cane, too. I have it hidden in my room. Every time he goes, he forgets something. If he didn't—if he didn't leave something behind him I know I should have to follow him to the city.

ANNA

Would you follow him?

MARIE

Yes. I'd follow him anywhere.

[*They are silent a long time*]

MARIE

He left something else behind him too.

ANNA

What.

MARIE

Smoke.

ANNA

Smoke?

MARIE

Yes, tobacco smoke. He smokes cigars, and when he kisses me he leaves the flavor of cigar smoke on my lips. It lasts a long time, if you're careful. I shan't eat any supper tonight.

ANNA

You shouldn't go without meals. It's bad for you.

MARIE

I don't care. It's his tobacco smoke, and, if I eat, it'll be gone.

ANNA

Where are you going?

*[For, instead of proceeding up to the house,
MARIE has led the way into the garden]*

MARIE

I want to show you something.

*[She stops at last before a secluded bench
which stands in the shadow of the hedge on
the edge of a gravel path]*

MARIE

Do you see this?

*[She points to a design scratched deep in
the gravel. It consists of a huge circle, con-
taining a series of smaller circles which di-*

min. progressively to a dot where a cane was evidently thrust into the ground]

ANNA

Yes.

MARIE

He drew it. So now I've got the unfastened button, the smoke, the cane and this drawing—to keep me until next Sunday.

ANNA

[studies the design in the gravel absorbedly]
Shall we go in?

MARIE

Do you mind waiting out here while I go up to my room and write in my diary? I must be alone when I do that. I shan't be very long.

ANNA

All right. I'll wait.

MARIE

It's nice out here this time of evening.

ANNA

Yes. I shan't mind waiting. I can walk about, and smell the flowers, and listen to the birds.

MARIE

I hate to leave you alone, but I have so many thoughts in my head that I simply must write them down.

ANNA

What sort of thoughts?

MARIE

All sorts . . . millions of them . . . and when I have finished writing in my diary I shan't have any thoughts at all.

ANNA

Not even of Victor?

MARIE

Yes . . . Victor . . . but that isn't thoughts . . . it's feeling.

ANNA

Yes.

MARIE

I shan't be long.

[She moves off in the direction of the house]

ANNA

Don't hurry.

[The drowsy silence of the garden is broken only by the song of nesting birds. A scent-

laden breeze wafts fitfully in from the fields, ruffling the grass with gentle fingers. ANNA sighs and sits down on the bench. Wistfully she studies the circles in the gravel at her feet. Then she sighs again and closes her eyes. Presently, her eyes tight shut, she reaches back over her shoulder and slowly unfastens the top button of her blouse. Somewhere a twig snaps with a sound like a footfall. ANNA opens her eyes, starts guiltily and looks up and down the path. Having made sure that no one is coming she resumes her contemplation of the pattern in the gravel, while furtively, almost breathlessly, she fumbles in her bag. After a brief search she produces a half consumed cigar. This she draws lightly across her lips as though it were a stick of rouge. ANNA breathes deeply, her head thrown back. Though her eyes are closed, two teardrops filter their way through the lids and hang glistening in the corners. Ten minutes pass, but ANNA does not stir until footsteps sound unmistakably down the path. And when she opens her eyes the teardrops roll slowly down her cheeks, leaving moist little trails behind them]

MARIE

[approaches the bench, a pen in her hand]

I say, Anna, how do you spell——

*[But she stops suddenly when she sees ANNA's
tear-stained face]*

ANNA

Spell what?

MARIE

[her voice is low but cold]

What is the matter?

ANNA

Nothing.

*[The birds have chosen this moment for the
climax of their song, and it seems as if the
whole world is full of their warbling]*

MARIE

The top button of your blouse is undone.

[They look into each other's eyes]

ANNA

I——

*[But she does not finish. There is a long,
strained silence]*

MARIE

Look out . . . you'll step on the drawing.

ANNA

I won't step on it . . . I don't want to step on it . . . Oh, I might as well tell you. . . . I . . . I couldn't step on the drawing——

MARIE

What are you going to do about it?

ANNA

I'm going home . . . in the morning.

[MARIE makes no reply. Her head is held high, indignantly, and there is a cruel glint in her pretty eyes. ANNA's head is bowed; her red lips are twisted in a pathetic little smile. The rumble of a train can be heard somewhere in the distance. It is half-past seven.]

THE END

TWO SLAPS IN THE FACE

TWO SLAPS IN THE FACE

A Budapest street at two o'clock of a sunny autumn afternoon. JULES and ALFRED are walking home from school, carrying their books under their arms. Neither is quite seventeen.

JULES

You haven't said a word for ten minutes.

ALFRED

No.

JULES

Don't you feel well?

ALFRED

I'm all right.

JULES

You have been depressed all day.

ALFRED

Yes. . . . I'm depressed.

JULES

Why?

ALFRED

Because women are so deceitful.

[There is a pause]

JULES

You mean Vilma?

ALFRED

Of course. . . . Vilma. Who else?

[Another pause]

JULES

What has she done?

ALFRED

She hasn't done anything special. She is deceitful, that's all. Women are all alike.

JULES

What happened, anyhow?

ALFRED

You know that water tower on Marguerite Island?

JULES

Yes.

ALFRED

Lots of fellows and girls meet there in the evening. She and I used to meet there too.

JULES

At the water tower?

ALFRED

Yes. At six every afternoon. She'd say she had a music lesson, and I'd say I was going to the library, and we'd meet at the tower and go walking under the trees as all lovers do . . . only ours was an innocent affair, for I never even kissed her because she was afraid someone might see us. No, I'd only take her arm, and we'd walk along and talk about the future . . . when we'd be married, and things like that. And sometimes we'd quarrel about her music teacher. I was a little jealous of him. I tried to make Vilma jealous, too, but she'd never show her jealousy. She's too clever. But she loves me——

JULES

Yes, but what happened?

ALFRED

I'm coming to that. . . . So we always met at the water tower until one day her mother intercepted a letter. . . . It was my own fault. I didn't have to write a letter at all, much less put the water tower in it. I could have written "the usual place," but, like a fool, I wrote "the water tower." . . . Well, her mother intercepted the letter but never said a word

to Vilma about it. And the next afternoon she watches Vilma tying a new hair ribbon in a double bow, and when Vilma says "Music lesson" she pretends to believe her and lets her go without a word. But she follows her. You see?

JULES

Oh!

ALFRED

It was terrible. There I stood in front of the tower, never suspecting a thing. And Vilma came up. "Hello!" "Hello!" we said to each other, and arm in arm we walked toward the trees. I asked her if she loved me, and she said of course she did. I asked her if she loved me very much, and she said very much. I said, "I adore you." And she said, "Not as much as I adore you." I said: "It is impossible for anyone to be adored as much as I adore you." And at that moment her mother rushes up like a bull.

JULES

How do you mean—like a bull?

ALFRED

Like a female bull. She rushed up and planted herself in front of us. I felt like running away, but I couldn't leave Vilma alone in trouble. . . . She just stood there glaring at both of us. She never

said a word to me. She couldn't; she doesn't know me. But she grabbed hold of Vilma, and shrieked: "So this is your music lesson! So this is why you put a new ribbon in your hair!" Poor Vilma couldn't say a word. She only stood there, trembling. Then suddenly that wild bull of a mother raised her hand, and, before I could prevent it, she gave Vilma a slap in the face . . . an awful slap in the face.

JULES

In the face?

ALFRED

Right in the face! And before I could say a word she had grabbed Vilma by the hand and led her away. There I stood looking after them. I can't explain to you how badly I felt. But I loved Vilma more than ever, because I knew how humiliated she must feel, having her face slapped like that in my presence. So I went home.

JULES

Is that all?

ALFRED

No. The worst is yet to come. Next day I wrote to Vilma, asking her to meet me at the tower on Thursday. I reasoned it would be safer than ever now, because, after what had happened, her mother would never suppose she'd meet me again.

JULES

Did she come?

ALFRED

Certainly she came. She cried as if her heart would break. I knew she'd be humiliated. She kept repeating over and over again: "If she only hadn't done it in front of you! If she had slapped me at home I wouldn't have minded half as much." Nothing I could say seemed to console her. Vilma is an awfully proud girl. She didn't stay very long. She had to go home. And as I was going home myself, an idea came to me.

JULES

What was that?

ALFRED

An idea of how to make it up to her for the slap she got on my account.

JULES

How?

ALFRED

If I hadn't written that stupid letter her mother would never have slapped her in my presence. Well, the only way to make it up to her was to have my father slap me in her presence. Do you see?

JULES

No.

ALFRED

Very simple. I wrote my father an anonymous letter in a disguised hand. "Dear Sir, Every day at six your son meets a girl at the water tower on Marguerite Island. If you don't believe me, go there and watch for him, and box the young scoundrel's ears as he deserves." Signed, "A Friend."

JULES

Did you send it to him?

ALFRED

Certainly. That suggestion about boxing the young scoundrel's ears wasn't strictly necessary. I know my father pretty well; and I was almost certain that, if he caught me, he'd hit me of his own accord. But I had to make absolutely sure, so as to be even with Vilma. She gets one from her mother as a lady; I get one from my father as a gentleman; then there is no reason for her to feel humiliated any longer. Wasn't that the chivalrous thing to do?

JULES

Absolutely.

ALFRED

A gentleman could do no less.

JULES

No.

ALFRED

I sent the letter, and I could see in father's face that he got it all right. He kept his eye on me all afternoon, and at quarter to six, when I was going out, he asked me where. I said: "To the library." And, sure enough, when I left the house he followed me, keeping about a block behind on the other side of the street. I was pleased. I reach the tower and I wait. Father came up on the other side and hid himself among the trees. I pretended not to see him. In about five minutes Vilma came. "Hello!" Hello!" we said to each other. "How are you? . . . Do you love me? . . . I love you." . . . I took her arm and led her toward the trees. And when we get there the old man pounces down on me. "Library, eh? You young scamp!" He gives me a choice line of language and before he had finished—exactly as I had planned it—he gives me a nice ringing slap on the face with his open hand. "Come along now!" he roars, and leads me away. But as we went he raised his hat politely to Vilma. It was a courteous act. I respect him for it.

JULES

Yes, it was.

ALFRED

The next day I meet Vilma again. What do you suppose she does? She laughs at me.

JULES

Laughs?

ALFRED

Laughs! . . . She said the expression on my face when father slapped me was the most comical thing she had ever seen. And she began laughing all over again. . . . Then I told her how I had planned the whole thing myself. I showed her a copy of the letter, and explained how I had humiliated myself to make it up to her for her own humiliation, and that it was nothing to laugh about; but she only went on laughing and laughing like a silly fool. And when I reproached her she said: "I can't help it. Since I saw your father slap you I can't respect you any more."

JULES

Is that what she said?

ALFRED

Would you believe it? . . . Yes. . . . I felt my face getting redder and redder. I couldn't say another word. And when she saw how humiliated I was, she became a bit sorry for me. "If you knew how ridiculous you looked when he slapped you," she

explained. "It's no use for me to try ever to love you again. I couldn't. I'm quite disillusioned." Then she started giggling all over again, and I walked away. I can still hear her laughing.

JULES

And now it's all over?

ALFRED

All over.

[There is a pause]

JULES

She's not worth grieving about. She's fickle.

ALFRED

They're all like that. . . . What's the use of being chivalrous? You let yourself be slapped in the face for them, and they only laugh at you.

JULES

You'd think she'd love you all the more after a sacrifice like that.

ALFRED

Yes, that's the baffling part of it. After her wild mother slapped her I loved her more than ever before . . . and respected her more, too. But she—

she—— It's so unreasonable! I don't understand it at all.

JULES

Neither do I.

[They walk on, shaking their heads dolefully]

THE END

FLEDGLINGS

FLEDGLINGS

A summer resort. It is past midnight. A young man raps softly on the ground-floor window of a villa. There is no answer. He raps again.

A VOICE

Who's there?

THE YOUNG MAN

Jules.

THE VOICE

Jules who?

THE YOUNG MAN

Jules Hotko. Open the window, Alfred.

[The window is opened. A young man in his nightshirt appears. Neither is quite seventeen]

ALFRED

What are you doing here?

JULES

I've been put out of the house.

ALFRED

What? Put out of the house?

JULES

If you don't take me in I'll kill myself.

[Alfred makes way for him to climb in through the window]

ALFRED

Don't make a noise. My father would murder me if he found out you came in like this.

[For a moment they sit in the darkness, silent]

ALFRED

What did they put you out for? Who put you out?

JULES

My father.

ALFRED

What for?

JULES

[not without a certain pride]

There's a woman in the case.

ALFRED

[impressed]

Oh!

[He stares and moves closer to him]

JULES

Do you know Hedwig Barna?

ALFRED

Yes. She is Mrs. Streitner now.

JULES

And did you know I was in love with her?

ALFRED

No; I didn't know that.

JULES

Well, you know it now.

ALFRED

Yes, now I know it.

JULES

For years she's been coming to our house. She's one of my sister's chums. And because she's much older than me she never paid any attention to me. Treated me like a little boy. Never even looked at me. I was only thirteen then. That was three years ago. Her husband is much older than she is. She hates her husband.

ALFRED

How do you know?

JULES

I can tell. . . . Well, after she got married, Hedwig still kept coming to see my sister, and I fell in love with her. As a girl she didn't interest me at all, but as a married woman . . . I fell in love with her. But it was a hopeless case . . . when a fellow's only sixteen . . . and a girl like that . . . What could she possibly see in me? . . . It was absolutely hopeless. . . . Oh, if you knew how that makes a man feel, Alfred! It's awful! You can't eat; you can't sleep; you can't prepare for examinations. . . . Nothing interests me these days except Hedwig. I keep seeing her, hearing her, smelling her all the time. She's the last thing I think about before going to sleep and the first thing I think about in the morning. I'm simply sick about her. . . .

[There is a pause]

ALFRED

Well, tell me what happened.

JULES

Yesterday she came again, and never even looked at me. She never notices me. . . . I can't walk up to her and say, "Madame, I love you!" She'd only laugh at me . . . or slap my face. There's nothing I can do . . . except perhaps shoot myself. . . .

When she arrived yesterday I knew at once that something was troubling her. The moment she came she drew my sister aside and they began to whisper. Then my mother came into the room and they went out in the garden. In the evening they came back into the house. She stayed until late at night, and then she told my mother she was afraid to go back to Budapest all alone and that she would telephone her husband to ask if she might stay with us overnight. She telephoned and her husband let her stay. They put up a cot for her in my sister's room.

ALFRED

Yes, well?

JULES

My sister's room is next to mine.

ALFRED

Well?

JULES

They went to bed, and I went to my room, too. There is a door between the two rooms. I listened at the door to what they were saying.

[*He pauses*]

ALFRED

Go on.

JULES

It seems that Hedwig needed money. She had spent six hundred kronen belonging to her husband and now she must replace it or be found out. All afternoon she and my sister had been scheming to raise the money somehow, and now, late at night, they were still at it. Hedwig cried so bitterly I thought my heart would break. She said she was so desperate she tried to hang herself that morning, only the rope broke. She is a lot plumper, you know, since she married, and heavier. And when you are near her a perfectly marvelous odor comes from her. It must be the perfume she uses. Makes all the blood rush to your head. And her arms are plump and round now, not bony as they used to be. Her throat is different, too. Seeing her like that in her negligee I couldn't keep from crying, I love her so. If you only knew, Alfred, my friend, if you only knew——

ALFRED

Stop your bawling.

JULES

Who's bawling?

ALFRED

Go on. What happened then?

JULES

It was impossible for her to raise the six hundred kronen. My sister had only six kreuzer. Hedwig had no money at all. She was afraid to ask her parents for the money. Every plan my sister suggested Hedwig would answer, "No, it is impossible!" And the next morning she must replace the money or her husband would find her out.

ALFRED

Suppose he did? What would he do about it? He couldn't have her arrested.

JULES

You are a fool.

ALFRED

Why?

JULES

You don't understand such things. The last thing Hedwig could do was let her husband find out.

ALFRED

What did she do with the money, anyhow?

JULES

I can't tell you that.

ALFRED

You can't tell me?

JULES

No.

ALFRED

Do you know what she did with it?

JULES

Yes, I know. I heard her tell my sister. I can only tell you this much: She gave the money to somebody. But don't ask me any more about it. You wouldn't get another word out of me if you tore out my tongue with red-hot pincers.

ALFRED

All right.

JULES

You can imagine how I felt, listening to all this at the door. I trembled from head to foot. There she lay—in desperate trouble—the woman, the only woman I loved——

ALFRED

Now don't start bawling again.

JULES

Who's bawling?

ALFRED

All right. What happened then?

JULES

There she lay, weeping her heart out. Could I hesitate? I went to my father's study, took the key, unlocked his desk drawer, counted out six hundred kronen, locked the drawer again and tiptoed back to my room. Hedwig had to rise at six this morning to catch the first train to Budapest. At six-thirty I was waiting for her in the garden. "Hedwig," I said, "here are six hundred kronen. I know everything. Let us not discuss it."

ALFRED

What did she say?

JULES

She looked at me.

ALFRED

How?

JULES

Surprised. Then she asked me where the money came from. "Never mind," I answered, "just take it; it is money I have saved. You can pay me back when you like." Then she wept, and put her arms around me. All the flowers in the garden didn't smell as fresh and sweet as she did. . . . She put her arms around me and kissed me on the forehead. And then she asked: "How can I thank you, dear?"

She called me "dear." I said: "Kiss me on the mouth!" She looked at me queerly—and she kissed me on the mouth.

[There is a pause]

ALFRED

Well, well!

JULES

Then she turned and went away. Just, "Adieu!" It was beautiful!

ALFRED

Did your father miss the money?

JULES

Not until this afternoon. He made an awful rumpus around the house, and at last I told him I had stolen it. From four this afternoon until ten tonight he kept me in his study, trying to make me tell what I had done with the money. But I wouldn't tell. At ten o'clock he put me out of the house. From ten to twelve I wandered along the roads trying to decide what to do. I'd have blown out my brains, but I hadn't a revolver. There isn't a river to drown yourself in. And hanging is too hideous. And then I came here.

ALFRED

What did your sister say?

JULES

She kissed me when they put me out. Well, here I am. And if your father finds out I came in through the window he'll murder me.

ALFRED

No. He'll probably murder me.

JULES

Yes, that's possible, too.

[*A long silence*]

ALFRED

Well, what's to become of you now?

JULES

I don't know.

ALFRED

Oh, stop that bawling!

JULES

Who's bawling?

[*Another silence. Overcome with self-pity, JULES throws himself across the foot of the bed and buries his face to stifle the sobs. Presently he falls asleep, his eyes still wet with tears. But ALFRED does not sleep; he*

sits huddled against the head-board of the bed, wide-eyed, watching his sleeping friend, and telling himself over and over again, without conviction, that somehow, in the morning, the muddle will right itself]

THE END

THE KNIGHT OF THE BLUE CHIN

THE KNIGHT OF THE BLUE CHIN

The place is a summer resort. The time is noon of a beautiful April day. A young lady of forty-five is strolling with an old gentleman of forty-four.

SHE

Seems strange to be walking with you again.

HE

Why?

SHE

Well, it must be fifteen years since we were together like this—alone. You were in love with me then. Do you remember?

HE

I am flattered that *you* remember. It never seemed to make much impression on you—then.

SHE

If you only knew——

HE

You are speaking so low I can scarcely hear you.

SHE

A wise woman always speaks with quiet reverence
of her bygone love affairs.

[He stops suddenly]

SHE

What did you stop for?

HE

[starts walking again]

You loved me, too? You did really? Well!

[This time it is she who stops]

SHE

And you never suspected it?

[Both are silent awhile. He shakes his head rather ruefully and looks thoughtfully at the ground. She smiles at him sympathetically.]

HE

Why did I never know?

SHE

It was your own fault. You used to come to our house day after day. My husband was away. He was always travelling then. That was the time he got that big railroad concession. And I was always

glad to see you. So was my little daughter. Fortunately she was only twelve years old then.

HE

Why do you say that?

SHE

I'll explain. When I was out or occupied in some other part of the house you used to play with my little girl. I paid very little attention to you at first. You were given to telling comic stories, a practice which I have always regarded as an old man's pastime. Moreover, the anecdote is an epic form of art—and I, with my husband away all the time, was in the frame of mind to appreciate the lyrical——

HE

I must have been very stupid.

SHE

Oh, I don't mean to imply that you weren't welcome. You came and went. And I was glad when you came, but I was not sorry when you went.

HE

I should have gone earlier.

SHE

Or later.

[*A brief pause*]

SHE

One day while rummaging in a linen closet I found a diary.

HE

Whose?

SHE

My twelve-year-old daughter's. It contained the usual silly things a young girl writes. I read it, smiling. Smiling until I came to the very last entry. It was nothing to smile about. It read: "I am in love with the Knight of the Blue Chin."

HE

This knight——

SHE

Was you. Like all dark-complexioned men who shave frequently you had a chin that was quite blue. I was alarmed.

HE

Why?

SHE

My little daughter was in love with you. I had often heard her comment on the wonderful blueness of your chin, but never had I dreamed that she was

so deeply enamored of it. I restored the diary to its hiding place and went downstairs. Then you came.

HE

Yes?

SHE

And when you kissed my hand my fingers touched your chin, and somehow I seemed to feel its blueness oozing into me like a magnetic current. You were quite transformed in my eyes. I was even a bit afraid of you. My daughter was in love with you! That made me think about you as I had never thought before.

HE

What did you think?

SHE

For the first time I saw the potential lover in you. A nice woman rarely notices a man in that way until some other woman draws her attention to him.

HE

But this was only a child.

SHE

That made me all the more curious. The following evening, after I had put her to bed, I got out her diary. That day she had written in it: "My knight has two eyes and both are black, and when

he looks at you with his two black eyes you want to cry."

HE

A curious observation.

SHE

And a most dismaying one. It had never occurred to me to count your eyes. With real impatience I awaited your next visit. And when you came I quickly looked at your eyes. They were actually two and black. It was the first time I had ever looked at a man with rivalry in my heart. The feeling was so strange, so disquieting that I determined not to think about you any more. And a woman making up her mind not to think about a man is like a chronic gambler vowing never to touch cards again.

HE

What happened then?

SHE

More entries in the diary. "The knight's voice is beautiful, as beautiful as a rose." For a long time I did not understand that. One must be very young or very old to appreciate such a comparison perfectly. Yet I did notice how beautifully you spoke. Your voice rang like a bell. . . . I was very

uneasy those days. But not on my daughter's account.

HE

How utterly stupid I must have been!

SHE

She was only doing what every school girl does. But she was putting me into a position both dangerous and exasperating. In books and in plays it is always the child who saves the erring mother from sin. And here was my child fairly forcing me into the arms of a man.

HE

If I had only known!

SHE

One day a perfectly dreadful entry appeared. "This morning when Mademoiselle and I were walking we met the Blue Chin. The Blue Chin was strolling with a Blonde Lady and laughing. The Blonde Lady was laughing, too. But I cried. And Mademoiselle laughed at me."

HE

What did you do?

SHE

I took the middle course. I neither laughed nor wept. I wonder if you know what it means when a

woman does not laugh. It is far worse than when she weeps. The idea that tears are the opposite of laughter is purely of masculine invention. It may be true of men. With us the opposite of to laugh is not to laugh. A woman's tears are a physical necessity, like sneezing or coughing—but never mind that. As I said, I did not laugh. And when you came—you probably won't remember this—I asked you nervously, rather impertinently, who the blonde woman was.

HE

I don't remember that——

SHE

No. Perhaps you never heard it at all. You may have understood me to say something else. Praise of my husband, perhaps. Would a conversation between a man and a woman be of any interest, I wonder, if words had precisely the same significance in the ears of both?

HE

I . . . pardon me if I seem a bit confused—but—are you saying that you fell in love with me?

SHE

That, too.

[*Naturally there is a pause*]

SHE

And now comes the sensational part. For several days I left my daughter's diary unread. I was truly afraid of it. I went about in a state of perpetual agitation; wrote long, affectionate letters to my husband; kissed my daughter passionately; and when you came—well—there was a day, a certain day——

HE

Pardon me for interrupting you, but wasn't it a Thursday?

She

Why, no! It was a Monday.

[He strikes crossly at a bush with his stick]

SHE

That was the day when—if you had—if you had——

[She looks at him expectantly]

HE

If I had what?

SHE

That is the place where you should have interrupted me. There are sentences which a clever man never permits a woman to finish. But had you understood——

HE

What then?

SHE

Nothing. Here, again, was a place you should have interrupted me.

[He makes as if to strike the bush again, but refrains]

SHE

It must have been four or five days later when curiosity impelled me to open the diary again. I found this entry: "The Knight has ugly teeth and on the top of his head there is a place where there is no hair and the Knight combs the hair he has over the hair he hasn't."

HE

The young imp!

SHE

The very next day I bought her a French doll which was a whole head taller than she was. And when you came, I laughed. And after you had gone, I cried. Never since have I had such a genuine, full-hearted, thoroughly satisfactory cry.

HE

It was all over then?

SHE

Worse than that. It was beginning to come to an end. Which is far more hopeless for a man than when it is quite ended.

HE

And what that young imp wrote sufficed to spoil me for you completely.

SHE

Completely. Once she wrote: "Before the Knight comes into a room he blows his nose in the hall." That's how it is with children. Their love passes quickly and pitilessly. And my daughter carried me along with her. In love and out of it in two weeks. To be sure, the swift pace left me a bit dizzy, but the fact remained that I arrived—safely.

HE

A nasty story!

SHE

Do you think so? For me it has something sweet in it . . . like old wine.

HE

For me it is sour—like badly corked old wine. You might have corked it better. Why did you tell me all this?

[She reflects a moment]

SHE

Because—not a word of it is true.

HE

I beg your pardon.

SHE

I just made it up as I went along. You see, it was necessary for me to try it on someone.

HE

Necessary?

SHE

Yes. My daughter's husband is away. There is a man who calls on her frequently. She came to me, weeping, for advice. She must be saved. Tonight I shall tell her the story you have just heard and——

HE

And what about the diary? Is that an invention, too?

SHE

It may console you to know that the diary did exist. The rest is untrue. But it will serve as a pretext for saying to her, "My daughter, once you saved your mother from her own folly. Now the moment has come when your mother can save you." It will have its effect. I am certain of that.

HE

Tell me one thing.

[*He regards her dubiously*]

SHE

Yes.

HE

This certain Thursday—why did you say it was a Monday?

SHE

Did I say Monday?

HE

You most certainly insisted it was on a Monday.

SHE

It wasn't a Monday at all.

HE

Then it was Thursday.

SHE

No.

HE

In saying that it didn't happen on a Monday you imply that it *did* happen. And just now you declared that none of it was true. What am I to believe? What are you trying to do to me, anyway?

SHE

I am pouring the old wine back into its bottle, and sealing it securely this time. I offered you some, but you—— [*Her glance travels from his head to his feet and remains there, glued to his shoetips, while she finishes.*] But you were not connoisseur enough to appreciate it.

HE

[*in utter discomfiture*]

Now——

SHE

Now let us talk of other things.

THE END

A PRELIMINARY SKIRMISH

A PRELIMINARY SKIRMISH

The room is furnished in rather flamboyant taste and is now in great disorder. The table is littered with the remnants of a repast; on the sofa lies a soiled blouse; on the carpet a crumpled sheet of wrapping paper and beside it the broken half of a roll. A man walks impatiently up and down the room. It is plain he has been waiting a long time. Presently a woman enters. She is young, pretty, blonde, obviously of the theatre.

HE

Half past nine.

SHE

Only quarter past.

HE

Half past.

SHE

Well, suppose it is. Suppose it is half past nine. What's it to you? Are you my husband?

HE

Where were you until half past nine at night?

SHE

Nowhere.

[She takes off her hat and cloak, hangs them away, picks up a newspaper and nonchalantly sits at the table reading it]

HE

[bursts out suddenly]

Oh, that's the way you feel about it! I'll show you. Where were you from two till half past nine? I'll kill you!

[He picks up a chair and brandishes it threateningly]

SHE

Oh, stop it, stop it! Don't act. If you don't leave this house I'll call the police. *[Placatingly]* You rough thing! What's the matter with you? Don't be so nervous. Can't you behave? You're like a silly boy. . . . Come here. Give me a kiss. . . . Come on now.

HE

[his lips are pressed against her throat]

Boo . . . oo . . . ooh!

[The words are inarticulate but they are spoken with firm conviction]

SHE

Will you ever do it again?

HE

[speaks down the neck of her blouse]

Where were you from two till half past nine?

SHE

I never left the house until four.

HE

That's not true. I came at two o'clock and you were gone.

SHE

No, I was upstairs, visiting the Mahlers.

HE

The Mahlers were not at home.

SHE

I know. That is why I came right down again.

HE

I waited here a whole hour. You never came back. Did it take you an hour to come down one flight of stairs?

SHE

Why don't you wait till I tell you? I started downstairs, and on the way I met the janitor. He told me his wife had a baby this morning, and I

went down to see it. It's the cunningest little thing! Just born today.

HE

That's not true. The janitor's wife had a baby exactly six months ago. I happen to know because I gave them ten gulden as a present. And you needn't try to tell me she has had another already. It can't be done.

SHE

I thought that infant looked old. They are awful liars, these janitors. Always making up stories to get tips out of you.

HE

Where did you go after you left the janitor's?

SHE

I came right back here. I never left this room until seven.

HE

That's not true. For I came back at half past six and you were still out. What is more, the bit of match-stick I had put in the keyhole was still there. So I knew you hadn't come home since I left here at half past three. You have lied to me again, and that proves it. You cheat, you have ruined my life and I am going to kill you.

[He picks up a table knife]

SHE

Say, who do you think you are? Are you my husband? Put that knife down. And get out of this house. Lisa, Lisa!

THE MAID

[*enters*]

Did you call me, ma'am?

SHE

Call a policeman.

THE MAID

Yes, ma'am.

[*She exits*]

HE

You have deceived me.

[*He picks up the roll from the carpet, then drops it again*]

SHE

Come here and kiss me.

HE

[*breathes the question down the neck of her blouse*]

Do you love me? Do you?

SHE

How can you say I deceive you?

HE

You tell me so many lies. The Mahlers, the janitor's baby, when you went out, when you came back—none of it was true. I know quite well where you were. You went skating with the Count at the Ice Palace, and afterwards you went to dinner together. And you needn't try to tell me he didn't kiss you, either. . . . I really ought to kill you. [*He grasps her by the hair.*] One pull and you are at my feet.

SHE

Let go of my hair.

HE

No.

SHE

Let go or I'll bite your hand.

HE

I'd like to see you do it. [*She bites his hand*] All right. I'll let go this time. If you hadn't bitten me you would have died. You defend yourself like a wild beast. All right. Good-bye. You'll never see me again.

[*He picks up the roll, looks at it, flings it down. Then he resumes his seat*]

SHE

[goes to the door and calls]

Lisa, go and call a policeman. Why didn't you go before when I told you?

MAID

I didn't know you wanted me to.

SHE

Go immediately. One's life isn't safe here.

HE

[reaching for the roll]

I'll kill you and then I'll kill myself.

[He picks up the roll and tosses it on the table as an actor in a melodrama might fling down a purse and say, "There, keep your filthy gold!"]

HE

My detectives report everything to me.

SHE

Oh! So you have put detectives on me?

HE

As if I needed detectives to catch you. A woman like you—I'd like to tell you what you are.

SHE

Don't you dare call me names.

[She begins to weep]

HE

I am glad to see there are some decent instincts left in you. Stop that crying.

SHE

[weeping all the harder into her handkerchief, from which a strong perfume is wafted to him]

I won't have you call me names.

HE

[his voice quivers with emotion]

If your mother only knew, your good, gentle mother!

SHE

There you go again with my mother. You leave her out of it.

HE

If your mother knew——

SHE

What has my mother got to do with it? You always drag her in—to make me cry. You use her to get the best of me. Well, you can't do it. *[She rises and faces him. Her eyes sparkle de-*

fiantly] If you want to know—yes, if you want to know——

HE

Yes.

SHE

If you want to know the truth.

HE

Speak. Say it.

[He raises the knife]

SHE

Put that knife down. I really believe you would murder me.

[She weeps again]

HE

So you confess? You admit you have betrayed me?

SHE

First of all, this is my house. Second of all, it is half past ten.

HE

Only a quarter past.

SHE

Half past. But it's all the same. No man has the right to make a scene in my house at this hour

of the night. Go away and never let me see your face again. If you don't go I'll call a policeman. You have no right in here, anyway.

HE

[fingers the roll, turning it over in his hand with a bitter smile, as if to say, "One tiny bullet from this weapon and all my sufferings are ended"]

I have no right here. But the count? He has, eh?

SHE

He has as much right as you have.

HE

[nods his head gravely, reluctantly, as if the moment for decisive action had come]

Do you know what you are? I'm going to tell you what you are. You are——

SHE

Say it. I don't care. It won't be the first time you've said it. Lisa, didn't you buy any ham today?

THE MAID

[answers from the adjoining room]

You said you wouldn't be home for supper.

HE

Of course! You expected to have supper with the Count.

SHE

What if I did? I have a perfect right to. You aren't my husband. Go and get some ham, and some tongue, too, Lisa. A quarter pound of each. And a pickle.

HE

[goes to her suddenly and embraces her]

Suppose I said to you——

[He breaks off, almost in tears]

SHE

What?

HE

[his voice trembles]

Suppose I said—I know a way—to change all this—and you and I—in the eyes of all the world——

SHE

[her voice is ecstatic, triumphant]

And don't forget to buy some bread, Lisa.

HE

[reaches for the roll and balances it reverently, as if he were about to say, "These pearls my grandmother wore"]

Emma, I could—I would—on my honor—if I had only myself to consider—but there is my mother. She is old. I am all she has in the world. I can't do anything she wouldn't approve. It would break her heart.

SHE

Your mother! And what of *my* mother? She doesn't count, I suppose. I'm not good enough for you. Get out of this house before I forget myself and slap your face. Come here and kiss me before I lose my temper. [*He drops the roll and starts toward her*] No. First apologize.

HE

I apolo——

SHE

You needn't. I don't want your apologies. You have humiliated me and I can't forgive you. Now go. The Count is more of a gentleman than you will ever be.

HE

You want to get rid of me so you can go out and meet him.

SHE

It's none of your business.

HE

All right. [*He claps his hat on his head.*] All right. You'll see.

[*Crushing the roll ruthlessly under his heel he rushes out. She throws herself on the sofa. She is very tired. The MAID returns with her purchases*]

MAID

[*unpacking the food*]

He acts just like he was your husband. What business is it of his where you go and what you do? You're not married to him.

SHE

[*with a cryptic smile*]

That's all right, Lisa.

[*For a while she lies there, thinking. Then she dozes off, leaving her supper on the table untouched. Downstairs the door slams. He has indeed left the house. But he does not go far. He paces up and down before the doorstep as if resolved to keep an all-night vigil there. He is not despondent. His mind is made up. He is thinking of his mother, and what words to use in the letter that will break the news to her in the morning*]

THE END

CURTAIN

CURTAIN

This is a little sketch. I am tempted to call it "a study in dramaturgy"—but that would make it sound unduly important. "Curtain," then—the ending of the first act of a comedy.

The characters are a woman between twenty-eight and thirty, a man of thirty-five or thirty-six, and a young man of twenty-eight. The scene is a river bank. Across are blue hills veiled in the mists of an autumn morning. The river shimmers with opal tints. The leaves of the trees are yellow, reddish and yellow-green. It is early in the morning.

HE

[*enters*]

What? You here?

SHE

[*a bit frostily*]

As you see!

HE

Do you always get up so early?

SHE

The radiator in my room at the hotel made such a clatter this morning that I awoke at half-past six and couldn't fall asleep again. So I decided to get dressed and come down to the river to enjoy this perfect autumn morning.

HE

I'm always up and out at this time.

SHE

[*does not answer. Looks across at the opposite shore*]

HE

I seldom see you alone.

SHE

Really?

HE

Yes.

[*There is a silence*]

HE

I suppose it shouldn't be difficult to find a widow alone, if one sets one's mind on it.

SHE

On the other hand it shouldn't be difficult for a widow to be left alone, if she sets her mind on it.

HE

Hm—shall I go?

SHE

I didn't mean just that. But—it's chilly—a dark, overcast day—on which people are apt to be frigid and their thoughts sad and gloomy.

HE

So I noticed. But I know the antidote.

SHE

What is it?

HE

A word. A word that warms the blood and makes the sun shine brighter.

SHE

For instance?

HE

For instance—Love.

[There is a pause]

SHE

How do you mean that?

HE

I love you. For two years I have loved you; for two years I have kept it secret. You have read it in my eyes; it shone in my every glance; it rang in every word I said to you.

SHE

Well?

HE

Well . . . that's all. Now we are alone, and I had to tell you. It has done me good to tell you. I love you, love you with the earnest devotion of a mature man in whom has been kindled not a fire of straw but a flame that burns slowly and steadily.

SHE

You talk like an emotional furnace-man.

HE

You are pleased to jest.

SHE

You are incredibly stupid. There is no limit to your stupidity.

HE

How so?

SHE

[turns to him laughing]

Have you no sense of fitness? What time is it? Seven. What date is it? The twenty-ninth of September. What sort of day is it? A beautiful, sunny, warm, melancholy autumn day? Not at all. It is gloomy, damp, chilly, shivery, sad. It oppresses me as if I were in a damp cellar. I have just got up and have had nothing to eat yet. The water in my wash basin was unendurably cold. Even now I'm not really awake. I am in a frightful humor. And you must choose this moment to declare your love; your love that has taken two long years to kindle into flame; your love that refuses to consider the fitting time, the proper season. Such a declaration had more fittingly been spoken in the twilight of a boudoir, carpeted in velvet, draped with silk, and a cozy fire crackling in the grate. And I would be lying on the sofa, dressed in my daintiest negligee. A background, in short, which the sentimental novelists are wont to describe, and which, after all, is quite nice in real life. . . . But in speaking here and now you have blundered grievously. You are in the plight of a man who, having invested his entire fortune unwisely, waits two years, then suddenly demands it back with compound interest. Your capital is lost. In a single moment you have spoiled everything.

HE

But . . .

SHE

You are too comically like the man whose hat the wind has blown into the Danube, and who stands on the bridge trying to retrieve it by making frantic, futile gestures toward the water far down below. The unique, the admirable thing to do in such a case is not to reach for your hat. Brutus murdered his father, and in olden times that was accepted as proof of his mastery over his natural filial instincts. The man who refrains from reaching after his hat which the wind has blown over the bridge will be the Brutus of the future. Nothing is easier than patricide. When you men learn to resist the feeblest of your instincts then you may boast of your superior strength and presence of mind. Don't speak now, don't stammer; you'd only be absurd. Now is the time for silence.

HE

Yes, I have blundered.

[There is a pause]

SHE

Grievously.

HE

I acknowledge it.

SHE

I am glad to hear it. But at least you have learned something which may help you with women in the future. Candidly I admit that had you found me at another time, in another humor, you might have succeeded. Try to remember that a single moment decides whether a woman is to be won. But you must choose the right moment. For a few years, at least, you will know better than to try to speak to a woman of love when she is hungry and cold and when the very thought of love is as distasteful as——

HE

Spare me the humiliating comparison. My sincerest thanks for the lesson. I trust I shall find it useful before I die. I kiss your hand.

[Raises his hat and exits at left. The moment he vanishes the young man enters at right]

SHE

[throws her arms around his neck]

At last you have come.

THE YOUNG MAN

Sweetheart!

SHE

Kiss me—kiss me! This beautiful melancholy autumn morning makes me yearn more ardently than

ever for the warmth of your lips. Embrace me. Hold me close. You've never been as dear to me as now, never as sweet, never as thrilling—as now.

[They embrace as]

THE CURTAIN FALLS

LIES

LIES

Late afternoon in February. A Budapest park. All day the sun has been shining warmly, but now it is setting and a bleak wind is whistling through the leafless branches under which a boy and girl walk arm in arm. The boy is nineteen; the girl is fifteen. A pair of skates on a strap dangle from her disengaged arm. Near by a clock strikes once.

THE GIRL

Good gracious, it's half past seven!

[She tries to withdraw her arm]

THE BOY

No, don't go yet.

THE GIRL

I must. Let me go. I'll get a scolding if I'm late for supper.

THE BOY

What time do you have supper?

THE GIRL

Let me go. At eight. And it's half past seven now.

THE BOY

Aren't you going to kiss me before you go?

THE GIRL

[*very earnestly*]

I mustn't kiss you.

THE BOY

Then I'll kiss you.

THE GIRL

No. . . . Please!

THE BOY

Hasn't anyone ever kissed you before?

THE GIRL

No.

THE BOY

Then I shall be the first.

THE GIRL

No, no—you shan't——

[*But when his lips are on hers she does not resist*]

THE BOY

Do you love me, Paula?

THE GIRL

Yes, I love you, Niklos. . . . I feel as if I could give my life for you, I love you so—Niklos.

[They kiss again, more ardently]

THE GIRL

Now let me go. I really must go.

THE BOY

I'll take you home.

THE GIRL

Not all the way. Only as far as Ferencz Square.

THE BOY

Just as you say, darling.

[They start for home]

THE GIRL

[as they walk]

Do you love me, Niklos?

THE BOY

I told you I did.

THE GIRL

Say it again. I like to hear you say it. I wish you would never, never say anything else.

THE BOY

I love you; I love you; I love you; I love you . . .

[He keeps on saying it until they reach Vorosmarty Street]

THE GIRL

I'm afraid I will get a scolding, it's so late.

THE BOY

No, you won't. God couldn't let you suffer on my account.

THE GIRL

Oh—God—I wonder he doesn't get angry with us. If I were in His place, and I saw that people thought of me only when they were in trouble, I'd say: "Now you want me, don't you?" And I'd turn my head away and walk out into the kitchen.

THE BOY

[gravely]

God is just and merciful. If you have faith in Him, no harm can befall you.

[He is rather pleased with himself, having successfully uttered such a high-sounding sentiment]

THE GIRL

[impressed]

You are so noble, Niklos.

THE BOY

[deprecatingly]

Not at all. It's only that I have a good heart. I couldn't bear to have you suffer on my account, in case they should find out you were with me. Still, when you are my wife I'll make it up to you. You shall be the happiest woman on earth. I'll lay the stars at your feet—the—the—*[finds he has begun too high, finishes less ecstatically]* everything your heart desires—a car—a house—horses——

THE GIRL

And will you love me as much as you do now?

THE BOY

More, much more! I shall adore you then.

THE GIRL

[earnestly]

Even if I deceive you?

THE BOY

What?

THE GIRL

[still more earnestly]

What if I were untrue to you?

THE BOY

[quite simply]

Then I should kill you. But you couldn't be untrue to me.

THE GIRL

[sincerely]

No. I feel that I am honorable. *[With the light of love in her eyes.]* I could never, never love anyone else but you, Niklos.

[They are silent, crossing the street]

THE BOY

What will you tell them at home?

THE GIRL

That depends.

THE BOY

On what?

THE GIRL

On whether they have seen me. If they saw me near the music school I'll say I was there. If they saw me near the park I'll say I was skating.

THE BOY

Where did you tell them you were going?

THE GIRL

Mother wasn't at home. I left word with the cook I was going to music school, but I took my skates along, too. When mother comes home cook will tell her I went to music school with my skates, and mother will say, "That wicked child will probably miss her music lesson again to go skating." But if I haven't been seen in the park I'll say I did take my music lesson and that I only brought my skates along in case there was time left for skating afterwards, but there wasn't. Do you understand?

THE BOY

[*dubiously*]

Yes. But what are the skates for?

THE GIRL

My, but you're dense! Where have we been?

THE BOY

[*slowly*]

In the park.

THE GIRL

Well, then, if anyone saw us there I can say I had been skating, can't I? If mama finds out, the most she can scold me for is for missing my music lesson. Do you see? Isn't it better to be scolded

for something trivial like that than have them suspect about you?

THE BOY
[*thoughtfully*]

Oh! I see.

[*They are silent awhile*]

THE GIRL
What are you thinking about?

THE BOY
How clever you are—how well you can lie.

THE GIRL
Only to mother. I never yet told a lie to father.
It's different with him.

THE BOY
I'm sort of afraid of you. I'm wondering if you'll lie as cleverly when you are my wife. It would be easy for you to fool me—because—even now—I don't understand all that mix-up about the music lesson and the skating. I guess it would be easy to lie to me. I'm sort of slow and stupid where such things are concerned. But anyway I'm honest.

THE GIRL
Do you mean that I am not honest?

THE BOY

Oh, no! You are the dearest and most straightforward girl in all the world. Only when I heard you lie so brilliantly it frightened me a bit.

THE GIRL

But I explained to you, it is only mother I'm fibbing to. And I'm only doing it for your sake.

THE BOY

[*disconsolately*]

Just the same I am afraid of you. You've made me look for hidden meanings behind every word you say. Oh, why did you do it? I know I shan't sleep a wink all night, thinking over all this. . . . Do you know what you've done? [*Tragically.*] You have destroyed my faith in you.

THE GIRL

[*sadly*]

You don't respect me.

THE BOY

Yes, I do. But if only you had lied less brilliantly—or at least so that I could understand the intricacy of it all. Paula, I am sure I should never in my life be able to catch you in a lie.

THE GIRL

[a bit ashamed]

Because I shall never lie to you. The truth is, I'm not really a good liar at all.

THE BOY

Yes, you are, and I'm afraid of you. After we are married—— *[Suddenly.]* Listen! I want to ask you something. Stop a minute.

THE GIRL

I can't. I'll get a scolding.

THE BOY

No matter. Stop a minute. *[They stop.]* I want you to promise me—now—on the day of our first kiss that you will never tell a lie again.

THE GIRL

Not even today?

THE BOY

Not even today.

THE GIRL

[hesitates]

But you must let me tell a lie just today—or else how shall I be able to explain where I was from six to eight?

THE BOY

You can simply say that you were out walking in the park. And refuse to say any more even if they torture you with red-hot irons.

[The thought of having her tortured in such a manner gives him pause, yet he manfully swallows his scruples and repeats]

With red-hot irons. Then you won't have told a lie and neither will you give yourself away. And if you get a whipping, bear it like a man. You'd suffer for my sake, wouldn't you?

THE GIRL

[adoringly]

Yes, you dear, good, honest Niklos.

THE BOY

[pleased, but frowns for honor's sake]

Don't flatter me, but promise.

THE GIRL

I promise.

THE BOY

Not even today?

THE GIRL

Not even today.

[They proceed in silence until Ferencz Square is reached]

THE BOY

[pressing her hand ardently]

Good-bye, Paula darling. Same place tomorrow afternoon.

THE GIRL

[thoughtfully]

Good-bye.

[When she enters the house the family is already at supper]

THE MOTHER

This is a nice time to come home.

THE FATHER

Young lady, where have you been so late?

[As PAULA does not answer at once, he stops eating and his expression is menacing. The maid slips unobtrusively out of the room. There is a pause]

THE MOTHER

[rather helpfully now]

Didn't you know what time it was?

THE FATHER

[thundering]

I asked you where you've been.

THE GIRL

At music school.

THE FATHER

[with a male parent's characteristic contempt for music schools]

And does that last until eight o'clock?

THE GIRL

No—but from there I went to the park to skate awhile, and before I knew it——

[With increasing assurance she calmly elaborates the lie]

[The Boy is awaiting her at the accustomed place the next afternoon]

THE BOY

[eagerly]

Well, what did you tell them at home last night? Did you lie?

THE GIRL

[For a moment conflicting impulses struggle within her. Then she looks him frankly in the eyes]

Certainly not. I simply told them I'd been walking in the park

[Under his trusting gaze she falters a bit, overcome by the realization that now she has deceived everyone—her father, her mother]

and NIKLOS. But quickly she decides that it couldn't have been avoided and recovers her composure]

THE BOY

Did they scold you?

THE GIRL

No.

THE BOY

[blind and fatuous as any husband]

You see! Lies aren't a bit necessary, are they?
[A doubt crosses his mind.] You really did tell the truth?

THE GIRL

[convincing and self-possessed as any wife]

Of course, dear. You don't suppose I'd lie to you?

THE END

A RAILROAD ADVENTURE

A RAILROAD ADVENTURE

The scene is a compartment on the section of the Fiume Express which meets the boat from Abbazzia. It is a fresh cool summer morning. The train has just pulled out of a way-station; and a man has entered the compartment and bowed to its solitary occupant, a handsome woman of thirty-five.

SHE

How nice to meet you here! Are you going to Abbazzia, too?

HE

Yes.

SHE

Then we have time for a nice long chat. I've rather wanted a chat with you. Though it's only two weeks since my husband introduced us, it seems as if I had known you a thousand years. That's a banal thing to say, isn't it? But I mean it truly.

HE

[*bows smilingly*]

SHE

You see, I've been reading your novel. I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed the keen psychological subtleties of it. Why, it has virtually transformed my way of thinking—your wise and beautiful romance of yesteryear——

HE

[deprecatingly]

Oh!

SHE

Yes—and I determined, if I ever met you again, to repay you by telling you a rather nice little story of my own——

HE

It would be a pleasure.

SHE

It happened a long time ago—perhaps ten years, yet it is vivid, singularly vivid in my memory.

[The train starts off]

HE

Do tell me.

SHE

As I said, it was ten years ago. I was waiting at Fiume for my husband, who had promised to come and take me home. Instead a telegram came. He

was detained. I was to return alone. Without delay I reserved a first-class compartment and started back for Budapest.

[*There is a pause*]

HE

And then?

SHE

A few stations outside of Fiume a lieutenant came into my compartment. I'm not sure if it was Plase or Lokve—some little station like that.

HE

Does it matter?

SHE

No. It's not important. The lieutenant came in and then there were two of us in the compartment. A young officer with a tiny mustache and a young pretty woman. That was I. It happened so long ago I am safe in referring to her as a pretty woman.

HE

[*expresses the usual compliment in a single significant*]

Oh!

SHE

At first the lieutenant only looked out over the landscape, but presently he began to notice me. I

was really worth noticing. I wore a charming little frock, dark blue with—but that isn't important. He did begin to notice me, furtively at first but very closely. I pretended to be reading a newspaper, but I was watching him, too. You see, a long journey was ahead of me. For an entire day I was to be locked up in a tiny compartment with this strange soldier. I found the situation rather piquant. You can hardly blame me for that.

HE

Certainly not.

SHE

Before long things began to happen. The train turned a curve so that the sun shone in the lieutenant's eyes. He moved to a seat opposite me from which he was able to study me all the better. He had very expressive eyes and when first I looked into them they were raised to me questioningly as if to say: "Dear lady, will you permit me to look at you?" I have never seen eyes that could plead so eloquently. "See with what respectful admiration I regard you? Can't you tell that you have kindled my impressionable soldier's heart into flame? Have pity on me."

HE

And what did you do?

SHE

I laid my newspaper aside. With that gesture I indicated that I was willing to let the flirtation begin. It was as if I had said: "There, the screen which separated us is removed, and now . . . eye to eye." He answered with a look of gratitude. And an unspoken promise in his eyes assured me: "I shall not forget what a gentleman owes a lady in a situation like this. I shall not address you; only my eyes shall speak for me." I thanked him with a glance.

HE

And did he keep his promise?

SHE

Be patient. I'll come to that presently. For a long time he looked at me dreamily, modestly, respectfully. He seemed to be studying my face with touching reverence. Then he stared at my hands and smiled at them as if to say: "What delicate white hands!" Then he looked at my feet. In that quiet detached way nice men look at things which don't belong to them. For a long time he studied me like that from head to foot. And my eyes answered "Ah!"

HE

What did your eyes answer?

SHE

They answered "Ah!" A languid, pleased "Ah" with a tinge of reproach in it. The sort of "Ah" we utter when a man takes us firmly in his arms. But I didn't say it. I only looked it.

HE

And the soldier?

SHE

The soldier took it admirably. He didn't misunderstand. Only his eyes grew sad and intent as if to say: "Isn't it a pity? We two are so ideally suited to each other. We can understand each other's very glances. And yet we must always remain strangers." He sighed and bade me farewell.

HE

How?

SHE

With his eyes. With his eyes he pressed a pure and tender parting kiss on my brow. He shook his head sadly and his eyes said "Nevermore."

HE

Nevermore?

SHE

Yes, "Nevermore . . . nevermore. . . ." By that time our train had reached Agram, and he got off.

As he left the compartment I looked after him with real regret. He was a fine, well-bred young man. He never once looked back. He simply rose from his seat and went out. . . . I never saw him again. But I shall never forget him. It was the most charmingly poetic tête-à-tête I ever had. Since then, whenever the rudeness of men offended me, I have thought of that soldier with admiration and respect. He was quite the nicest man I ever met. And I like to think that he loved me as no one else has—purely, unselfishly, hopelessly. Looking back, I could almost fall in love with him myself. But past is past.

HE

I thank you.

[There is a long silence]

SHE

I beg pardon, did you say anything?

HE

I said I thank you.

SHE

For what?

HE

For the lovely things you have said about me.

SHE

Said about you?

HE

Yes, about me. That lieutenant was I.

[They are silent again. The woman studies him, frowning. The man takes a wallet out of his pocket and extracts from it a sheet of blue paper which he holds in his hand during the following conversation]:

SHE

What's that paper you have there?

HE

Nothing. Perhaps I'll show it to you later.

SHE

So . . . you're the lieutenant?

HE

Yes. I left the service four years ago. I was the lieutenant. I got on the train at Plase and got off at Agram. My uniform had orange-yellow facings.

SHE

[in amazement]

Yes.

HE

There, you see!

[There is a very long pause]

SHE

So—it *was* you! Astonishing!

HE

Why astonishing? I don't see anything remarkable in it.

SHE

Your eyes were strangely familiar when my husband introduced us. Now I know why.

HE

Were they? I wish I could say the same. But the fact is, I didn't remember you at all. I had forgotten the whole episode. But now you have brought it back to me quite clearly.

SHE

[is downcast]

HE

You see, there was no real reason why I should have remembered it. On that eventful day ten years ago when I met you on the train I was on my way to Agram to join my fiancée.

SHE

Merciful heaven!

HE

And so, I'm afraid, my glances didn't at all mean what you thought they did. For instance, while I looked at your hands I was thinking what a stingy old codger my prospective father-in-law was. He had made all sorts of excuses to evade paying the dowry. I smiled bitterly. You thought I was smiling at the delicate whiteness of your hands.

SHE

Yes.

HE

Why did I look at your hands and feet at all? When a man is deep in thought he generally stares at something. I might just as well have looked at the lamp. And if, when I looked at your feet, my expression was quietly resigned, it was because I had decided that if my father-in-law persisted in his stinginess we couldn't possibly marry. "How can we possibly marry?" I asked myself; and, puzzling over that problem, I must unconsciously have looked you over from head to foot. Just about then you say your glance said "Ah!" But quite oblivious to your "Ah," I was turning over in my mind the feasibility of going to my fiancée's father and bluntly asking him for the dowry. I would put our case to him

strongly and eloquently. But it would be a distasteful task. I sighed deeply, threw out my chest and thought, "Come what may, it has to be done." That's the time you thought my eyes said, "How tragic that we must always remain strangers to each other!"

SHE

My God!

HE

The train rolled along and I reflected: "Is there any use in speaking to her father? If he had meant to give us money, he would have done it of his own accord. And since he hasn't, he'll probably not do it if I ask him." I stared dismally at you, without seeing you. That was the glance that you interpreted as "Nevermore." In a way you were right, but the "Nevermore" referred to the dowry.

SHE

How horrible!

HE

And when we reached Agram, and I sighed and left the compartment without looking back, I was puzzling over the problem of how I could possibly afford to marry the girl without a dowry. And you interpreted that sigh as my despair at parting from you, and my failure to look back as a symbol of respectful adoration.

SHE

I am totally crushed.

HE

Perhaps I shouldn't have told you. It's wrong to destroy people's illusions. Yet it wouldn't have been decent of me to go on accepting at your hands sentiments and tender memories that I never deserved.

[He sinks back in his seat in self-satisfied silence]

SHE

How lamentable! And so my soldier was you!

HE

Yes—orange-colored facings and gold insignia. On at Plase and off at Agram.

SHE

I'm sorry. It was nice to remember my soldier just as I did. And now you've spoiled him.

HE

I am sorry, too.

[The train is pulling into the environs of Fiume. From the compartment window the broad harbor can be seen]

SHE

It's extremely disappointing. But then we women must get used to that. Over and over again we learn that a man is lovable only when we have invested him with admirable qualities of our own imagining. We paint him in beautiful colors and then fall in love with our own handiwork. But the process of disillusionment is always painful to us. What you have told me today was terrible to hear. There is but one consolation——

HE

And that is?

SHE

[*quietly*]

That not one word of my story was true.

HE

What do you say?

SHE

Not a word. I made it all up. The day after tomorrow my husband will join me in Abbazzia. If you are there, you can learn from him that never in my life before have I traveled between Fiume and Budapest.

HE

Well . . . What——

SHE

Today I am entering Fiume for the first time. And so the whole story of my lieutenant is a lie. Which should teach you to be careful before you try to spoil people's illusions.

HE

Hm! But I was careful. You think you've caught me in a lie, but, fortunately, you haven't.

[He unfolds the blue paper which up to now he has held in his hand]

HE

This paper I've been holding all the time I spoke.

SHE

What's the paper to do with it?

HE

The paper is proof that I knew from the very first that you were not telling me the truth. Before I left Budapest yesterday I settled all my affairs and, among other things, paid my military tax. This is the receipt.

SHE

Well, what of it?

HE

A receipt issued in my name for 15 kronen mili-

tary tax. It shows that I was never a soldier in my life, never a lieutenant, never wore a uniform with orange-colored facings or any other sort.

SHE

Then you lied to me?

HE

[cheerfully]

Yes, indeed, and before I began lying I took this paper in my hand to prove, if need be, that I wasn't lying merely to make myself interesting but only to force you to admit that your story of your lieutenant was untrue. And as you see, I have succeeded.

SHE

This paper proves conclusively that you were never a soldier?

HE

[with triumph]

Conclusively.

SHE

So fortunate to have everything at hand. Do you mind giving me my bag? It's over there.

HE

[gives it to her]

Is this it?

SHE

Yes.

[Opens the bag and takes out a thick book which she shows to him]

SHE

What is the title of this book?

HE

[reads]

"My Diary."

SHE

I always carry my diary with me to keep it from falling into unfriendly hands. *[Turns the pages.]* 1896 . . . here it is . . . please . . . do you mind reading this page? On it you will find the story of the lieutenant written out in detail just as I have told it to you.

HE

[looks at her]

Then it's really true?

SHE

There's the proof.

HE

[reads a moment]

So it is. Now you have caught me, haven't you? But why did you deny it a moment ago?

SHE

How else could I have made you admit that you were not my lieutenant?

HE

Of course.

SHE

And now you see my illusions are intact. But will you tell me one thing? How did you guess about the orange-colored facings? As you may read in the diary, my lieutenant actually did wear orange-colored facings.

HE

I happened to know that a regiment uniformed like that was stationed at Fiume ten years ago.

SHE

How simple! Thank you.

[The train has pulled into the station and has stopped]

HE

[rises to go]

Well, good day.

SHE

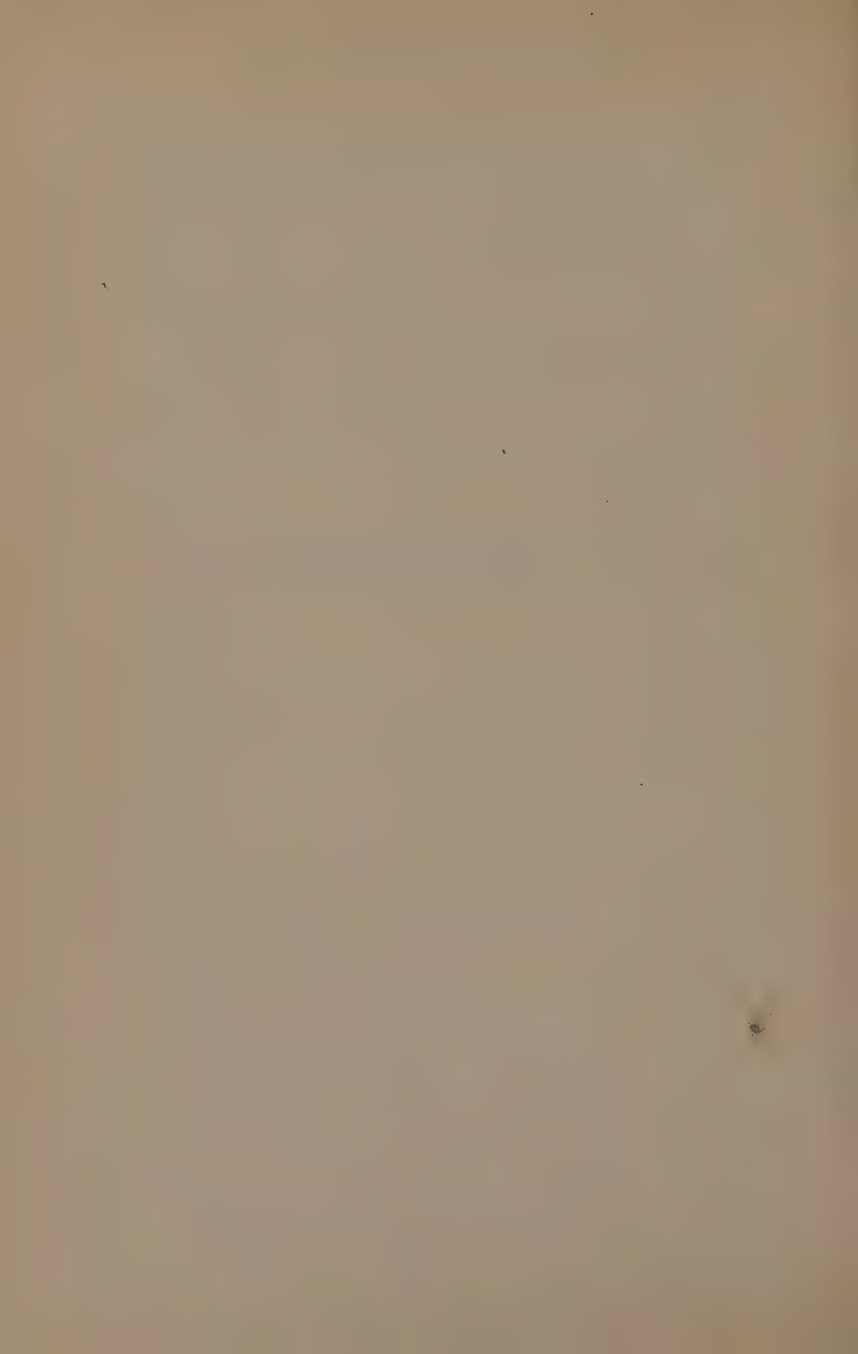
May I give you a parting word of advice? Never tamper with a woman's illusions. She will go to the uttermost limits to defend them. She knows in her heart that her illusions are nothing but pretty lies;

yet she can be capable of uttering a thousand ugly lies to defend one pretty one. Yes, she lives on lies, and defends herself with lies. "Tout est Mensonge" says the poet, and as he says it he lies. Good-bye. It has been a charming trip. Without you it would have been stupid.

[She nods to him brightly and busies herself with her luggage. He raises his hat and goes out]

THE END

SACRED AND PROFANE ART



SACRED AND PROFANE ART

A little salon just off the drawing room in the house of the BARONESS. It is evening. A reception is in progress. Music and the chatter of many voices can be heard from the drawing room. In the doorway of the little salon the BARONESS and the PAINTER appear. She is not very young, but rather pretty, with copper-colored hair and an exquisite figure. He is young, smooth-shaven, suave and handsome.

PAINTER

Please, Baroness?

BARONESS

[with a smile that is meant to be shy]

What is it?

PAINTER

Please come in? There's no one here.

BARONESS

But my dear Mr. Pirnocy!

PAINTER

Please? I want to be alone—with you.

BARONESS

What *are* you thinking of? Since when does one take a hostess by the arm and drag her into an empty room?

PAINTER

Did I drag you? I'm sorry—but the enchanting odor of your hair——

BARONESS

It's brilliantine.

PAINTER

Then the brilliant odor of your hair——

BARONESS

Did you drag me in here to make stupid puns?

PAINTER

Oh, Baroness!

[He wrings his hands dramatically]

BARONESS

Whatever are you wringing your hands for?

PAINTER

Because I'm in love.

[He sighs heavily]

BARONESS

In love? With whom?

PAINTER

With you.

BARONESS

That's impertinent! Who gave you the right to say such things to me?

[Head high, she moves toward the door]

PAINTER

[hangs his head contritely]

I had to say it, Baroness. I had to say it, even if I died for it. Go and tell your husband. Let him stab me, shoot me—I'll tell him, too—I love you—I adore you!

BARONESS

[on a note of tender reproach]

Pirnocy—Oh!

PAINTER

For months I have been wanting to say it, and tonight I couldn't contain it any longer. Your ripe red lips, your inscrutable eyes, your dazzling white shoulders—Baroness—I am mad!

[He kneels at her feet, snatches her hand and covers it with ardent kisses]

BARONESS

Don't, Pirnocy, don't! I am a respectable woman. I am faithful to my husband. Please—your eager lips, your hungry eyes—make me dizzy. Go Pirnocy, go! We must never meet again.

PAINTER

[reproachfully]

You are sending me away?

BARONESS

[tenderly]

Yes, you dear, dear boy, it is better so. Better for you, better for me. For even if, down deep in my heart, love for you began to blossom like a little blue flower—I should have to crush it—ruthlessly. Don't you see, Pirnocy?

PAINTER

[despairingly]

You are sending me away!

BARONESS

Don't say it like that, or you'll make me cry. See, I am crying. *[She dries her eyes with a tiny lace*

handkerchief] Here—here is the handkerchief into which I have wept. Keep it. A souvenir of my profound affection.

PAINTER

[raises it to his lips]

I shall keep it always—next to my heart.

BARONESS

And now let us shake hands. So . . . No, please, you *mustn't*! Let me go, Pirnocy! Someone may come.

PAINTER

If I could paint you then. Oh, what a portrait I could paint of you! All my love, all my passion, all my adoration I would put into that portrait. I could paint you as I have never painted before . . . my master work . . . and when I had finished I would destroy my palette and brushes, and never paint again. . . . Let me paint you?

BARONESS

What a charming idea!

PAINTER

Let me paint you. Come to my studio and let me paint you—undraped as Eve in Eden.

BARONESS

Pirnocy!

PAINTER

Yes, yes . . . naked . . . gloriously naked. It will be a holy secret.

BARONESS

Are you mad, Pirnocy?

PAINTER

Yes, yes—mad!

BARONESS

We are not living in the Middle Ages. Your suggestion is insulting, Pirnocy. Don't insult me, *please?* Don't spoil my illusions. I want my memories of you to be sweet and pure.

PAINTER

Then I'll paint you half draped—just a single white drapery flowing down from one of your beautiful shoulders.

BARONESS

[*firmly*]

Never!

PAINTER

Well, then, it shall be in evening dress. Just as you are now, the lamplight touching the whiteness of your neck and shoulders with gold. Ah, in your

sweet likeness on the cold canvas I shall paint my broken heart. You must let me paint you. You must! You owe it to the artist in me.

BARONESS

Would it really give you pleasure?

PAINTER

[fervently]

It is all I ask in the world.

BARONESS

I can't refuse you. You shall paint me in this dress. And I shall smile down at you from the model's platform the wistful, melancholy smile of the virtuous wife. And you shall make my smile immortal. Let me kiss you on the brow—as a pledge.

PAINTER

Oh, I could die of happiness! Ah, that chaste, sisterly kiss! Lower, lower—kiss me there. The taste of it will haunt me forever.

BARONESS

Go, go now! You are breaking my heart.

PAINTER

[*ecstatically*]

And you will really let me paint you?

BARONESS

Yes, I promise.

PAINTER

You are good . . . divine! My heart is so full.
. . . Yes, everything . . . I shall buy everything
myself . . . the canvas—everything—

BARONESS

Eh? Oh! I can't permit that. The canvas——

PAINTER

Please! How *can* you mention such a thing? I
shall pay for everything myself. Even the frame!
Even the paint! [*Shakes his head reproachfully*]
Please don't speak of it. You humiliate me.

BARONESS

But, my dear Pirnocy——

PAINTER

If it were to take the medicine out of the mouth of
my poor, sick mother, I still should buy the canvas,
the paint and the frame.

BARONESS

But——

PAINTER

My own labor, too! Why, if you had billions instead of millions, I shouldn't permit you to pay for it. No—no—I'd starve and let my mother starve and die for want of a doctor and medicine rather than take that beggarly thousand for my work. I want to do it for *you*. It will be a joy to suffer for you.

[He turns away to hide his tears]

BARONESS

And yet you say you love me.

PAINTER

Ask the moon if it will rise. Ask the flower if it will bloom.

BARONESS

If you loved me you'd leave these vulgar details entirely to me. Don't discuss it any more. Not a word. Do you think I could accept such a sacrifice from you?

PAINTER

At least promise me you won't insist upon paying for my work. That would be too humiliating. It will only take me ten days. Ten days of work!

Little enough to give to love! I would give them even if I starved every day of the ten.

BARONESS

Never will I permit such a thing. If you insist you shall never see me again. A thousand for expenses and a thousand for your work. That isn't really paying you. *Can one pay for art with money?*

PAINTER

But——

BARONESS

Of course not. Then it's all arranged, you nice silly boy.

PAINTER

You humiliate me.

[But he kisses her hand submissively]

BARONESS

[with real affection]

What a dear, naïve little artist you are!

PAINTER

I adore you.

BARONESS

Be careful! My husband——

[The Baron appears in the doorway]

PAINTER

Until tomorrow then.

BARONESS

Tomorrow.

PAINTER

I'll expect you at ten.

[*He exits*]

BARONESS

[*to herself*]

Charming, unaffected boy!

PAINTER

[*to himself, as he moves toward the buffet where champagne and sandwiches are being served*]

Two thousand! Not bad! If she'd consented to pose in the nude I might have got four thousand out of her.

THE END

THE CAB

THE CAB

The people of this dialogue are a MATRON and a MAN. I use the word "matron" instead of "woman" or "lady" for the purpose of indicating her age. For there are five certain years of a woman's life in which she can most aptly be described as a matron. The man, on the other hand, is mature enough to be called simply a man.

THE MATRON

It is a hundred years since I've seen you.

THE MAN

I regret it more than you.

THE MATRON

And I don't know whether to be glad or sorry that we have met again. For what can we talk about now save days and things long past? Things so old and dim that perhaps you have forgotten them altogether.

THE MAN

First you say it is a hundred years since we met, and now you refer to very ancient memories. You speak as if we were both at least sixty. I find that very significant.

THE MATRON

Of what?

THE MAN

When a woman begins speaking to me of "things long past" I am always certain that she has something to tell me. References to the passage of time are generally such a convenient pretext, such a safe starting point for reminiscences.

THE MATRON

That's clever of you.

THE MAN

What is?

THE MATRON

Guessing that I have something to tell you. But when a man ventures a guess like that he is generally pretty certain that he plays a part in the story the woman has to tell.

THE MAN

And *do* I play a part in yours?

THE MATRON

A most important one.

[There is a pause while he tries hard to remember]

THE MAN

I can't think what you may mean.

THE MATRON

I shall tell you, but I must ask you to be discreet.

THE MAN

But . . . of course!

THE MATRON

I don't mean about the story. You may repeat it wherever you choose. But I must ask you to give me your word of honor not to tell *when* it happened.

THE MAN

[offers his hand in a silent pledge]

THE MATRON

It happened ten years ago. Here in Budapest. In October.

THE MAN

I don't remember anything especial.

THE MATRON

We were both at a reception one evening. Your hair was chestnut-brown in those days. And mine was not as blonde as it is. Supper was served outdoors in the garden. My husband had gone to Berlin for two weeks, and so I had come to the party alone. At about one o'clock, when the conversation had begun to be a bit tiresome, I said good night to the hostess. You were standing nearby, looking ardently into my eyes.

THE MAN

Yes . . . I think I remember.

THE MATRON

You had been annoying me all evening long. For three weeks past you had shown unmistakable signs of being in love with me. Not that you ever spoke about it. But the way you looked at me, and the way you behaved! First you would stand up; then you would sit down; then you would rush out; then you would slink back again. You behaved, in short, like an awkward, infatuated boy.

THE MAN

[laughs good-naturedly]

Did I though?

THE MATRON

And as I said to the hostess, "Dear Therese, I've got to be going home," you suddenly vanished. And when I came out of the vestibule into the street, suddenly, there you stood.

THE MAN

Yes.

THE MATRON

And asked me if you might escort me home.

THE MAN

Yes.

THE MATRON

I laughed at your impetuosity, and told you that what you asked was most imprudent, yet I consented. For two reasons. First, you were so sweet and naïve about it that I didn't believe there was any ulterior significance in your request.

THE MAN

Oh!

THE MATRON

And, secondly, because . . . because I was almost in love with you myself.

[There is a long silence]

THE MAN

Really?

THE MATRON

Really. Yes.

THE MAN

You were in love with me?

THE MATRON

No. But almost. I was at the stage where the rest depended on you. A man and woman, as you know, can go along for a certain time without the faintest flicker of interest on her part, and then, suddenly, she becomes acutely aware of him, and waits breathlessly for him to make the next move.

THE MAN

Is that the way you felt about me?

THE MATRON

Just that way.

THE MAN

You never told me.

THE MATRON

No. A woman never does.

THE MAN

What an ass I was!

THE MATRON

[with a sigh]

It doesn't matter now. To continue the story—When you offered to take me home I was too surprised for the moment to know what to answer. Then, giving myself up to a reckless impulse, I said, "Yes." And you cried eagerly, "I'll go and get a cab!" That was your first mistake.

THE MAN

What was?

THE MATRON

Hurrying away to call a cab and leaving me alone for two whole minutes. You should never give a woman time to reflect and reconsider. I must have cared for you a great deal to survive it. And then the cab came.

THE MAN

A funny old one-horse hansom cab.

THE MATRON

Exactly. I am glad you remember the kind it was. For the whole matter turned on this cab. It was a cab, and not a fiacre. It was drawn by one horse, not two.

THE MAN

It was the only thing I could get.

THE MATRON

You *ought* to have found something else. For what happened next?

THE MAN

We got into the cab.

THE MATRON

Exactly. And rode for twenty-five minutes until we reached my home. Do you realize the difference between a hansom and a four-wheeler?

THE MAN

Well—not exactly—no.

THE MATRON

In the first place, the windows of a hansom rattle so fiendishly that you can't hear a word the person next to you is saying. Then, too, a hansom is cold and unfriendly in October, whereas in a four-wheeler neither the wheels nor the windows rattle. The wheels are covered with rubber tires and the windows muffled with felt. Inside a four-wheeler it is so comfortable and quiet that one is in a frame of mind for indulging in the finer nuances of conversation. One can say quite ordinary words, for instance, and give them an intonation of subtle significance. What was the first thing you said to me

as we clattered along in that rickety old hansom of yours? "How have you been?" you remarked. It was an extremely brilliant question. And I tried to answer, "Well enough." But the window rattled, the wheels squeaked and the whole vehicle creaked so that I had to fairly shriek my answer: "Well—w-e-l-l e-nough!" Quite different had we been in a smooth, silent four-wheeler. For then I could have lowered my eyes and said my "well enough" in a tone so soft and full of shy, tender meaning that you would have taken courage to go on. With a mere inflection of my voice I could have told you how glad I was to be with you like this, and yet how frightened I was at my indiscretion, and so forth, and so forth. But, as it was, I had to bellow it out most uncivilly, and you took fright and were silent. For about five minutes we jolted along in absolute silence. Now in a quiet, cozy four-wheeler silence, too, has its uses. After a while you would undoubtedly have said to me, "Why are you so quiet?" And then perhaps I would have begun to cry.

THE MAN

Oh!

THE MATRON

But who notices silence in a hansom? It is perfectly natural not to want to talk amid all that clatter. Or, to put it another way, one can't hear

silence in a cab like that. And sō it happened that even being silent together did not help us. Nothing *could* have helped us, once we got in that rickety old hansom. Even a woman in love can't be expected to take such things for granted, much less a woman who is only *almost* in love and whose method of expressing assent is necessarily limited to subtle sighs and significant little intonations.

THE MAN

Of course. What an ass, what an ass I was!

THE MATRON

We reached my home, we formally said good-bye, and that was the last I saw of you until today. I don't blame you for avoiding me. I hadn't encouraged you in the least, but then, you see, I couldn't without being utterly vulgar. And what I want you to know is that had you called a four-wheeler that night——

THE MAN

Oh!

THE MATRON

Isn't it strange how the loveliest things can be made or marred by a trifle? Don't look so glum. It is rather late to be pitying yourself—or me. And now, to punish you for your ancient error, I shall make you take me home to my husband.

THE MAN

Shall I call a cab?

THE MATRON

Please! It is beginning to rain.

THE MAN

This time—this time it will be appropriate for me to get a hansom.

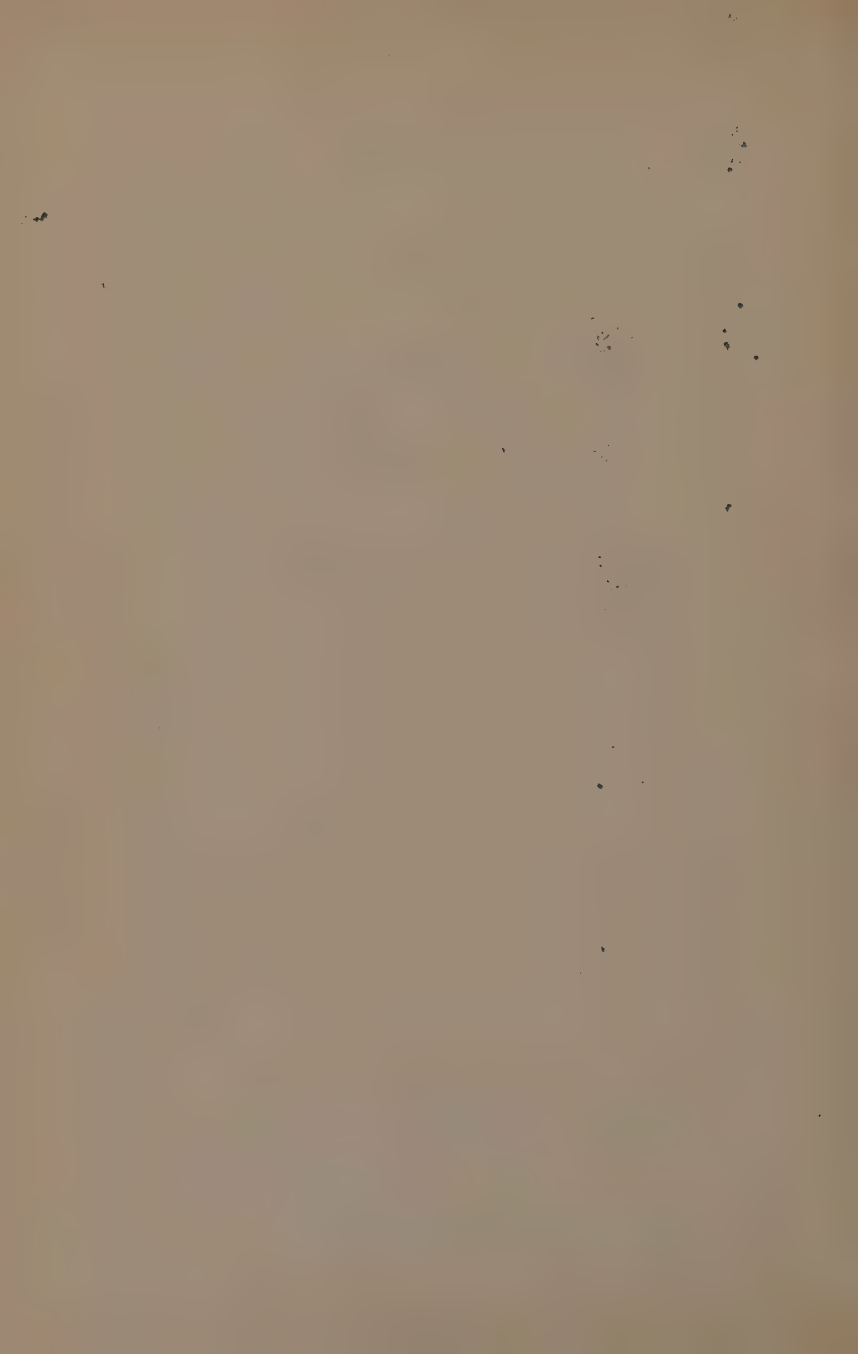
THE MATRON

No, no. A fiacre by all means. You must demonstrate, as I mean to, that the coziest four-wheeler in the world is unprofitable now. It seems that you are *never* equal to the situation. Here is a safe rule for you to go by: Whenever a man takes a woman home he should hitch as many horses as he can find to his carriage. Hurry now. I'll wait here.

[The MAN moves off in search of a cab, smiling a bit bitterly at the memory of bygone follies. And about him the rain falls, gray, autumnal]

THE END

A STREET AND NUMBER



A STREET AND NUMBER

On the fringe of the promenade overlooking the Danube comfortably reclining in two metal chairs, are the man and the woman. HE is fifty. SHE is much older—forty-five. It is noon. The glorious April sun gilds the treetops.

HE

And what happened then?

SHE

Then I discovered that wifely submission and loyalty have their drawbacks. That even domestic bliss can be overdone.

HE

Indeed?

SHE

I became aware that my husband had had his fill of domestic bliss. The quiet, the perfect accord, the even routine of our home had begun to pall on him. Every want of his was catered to. At table his favorite dishes were served. If he desired to go out, we went out. If he chose to stay home, we stayed home. And even if we had planned to go out—if the

theatre tickets, say, were bought—and he came home that evening complaining of a headache I would amiably take off my evening frock, slip into a dressing gown and prepare for a headache evening at home. You know what that is—cold compresses, cold supper, silence, early to bed.

HE

In a word, marital felicity,

SHE

Marital felicity didn't suit my husband. He grew weary of it, and of me. At least he concerned himself very little about me. When I realized what was happening I bought the prettiest frocks, the most fascinating negligees I could find. He never even noticed them. Then I tried being shabby. For a long time I showed myself to him only in a soiled and faded dressing gown. I hoped it might have the spice of novelty for him. But he remained quite oblivious. . . . I had grown too tame for him, you see; and he was driven in the end to seek excitement somewhere else. He did not seek it among women—I must say that for him. He gambled on the stock market. He went into politics. All in quest of excitement. It was about this time that he became a candidate for election to Parliament.

HE

I remember. And what did you do?

SHE

I decided to give him excitement. I remembered that curiosity is one of his dominant traits. So one day I took the little book in which I kept my household accounts and wrote inside the cover in pencil the words "Seventeen Brewer Street."

HE

Seventeen Brewer Street?

SHE

Yes. Just as I had expected he came upon it one evening soon after, when from sheer ennui he was turning the leaves of the household ledger. He read the words, but he made no comment. A few days later I caught him with the book in his hands again, studying thoughtfully the address, "Seventeen Brewer Street." I watched him from the adjoining room.

HE

His curiosity was aroused?

SHE

I contrived that it should be still more aroused. That very night I wrote the same "Seventeen Brewer

Street" on a bit of white paper and laid it in a locket I sometimes wore.

HE

But what was the Seventeen Brewer Street?

SHE

Nothing at all. Just an address I made up. I might as well have written Volta Street or Bernauer Street or any other street. It didn't matter. I just happened to think of Brewer. . . . Well, exactly as I had planned it, my husband found the address in the locket. From that day on he was a changed man.

HE

How do you mean?

SHE

His interest in me suddenly revived. Everything I did or said interested him keenly. When I went out he wanted to know where I was going. When I came home he wanted to know where I had been. And I pretended to find his interest perfectly natural. It made me very happy to realize that once more his thoughts were only for me. He shaved himself more regularly, paid more scrupulous attention to his neckties, came home early from the office, was grateful for every favorite dish at table, noticed and admired my new frocks and gowns.

HE

All this because of a street and number written in—I say, we men *are* easy, aren't we?

SHE

That isn't nearly all. One day he came home later than usual. Though he smiled and hummed to himself and pretended to be in excellent spirits, something about him fairly shrieked the information that he had just come from Seventeen Brewer Street, and had stood in front of the little yellow house scrutinizing every window with jealous intensity.

HE

Oh, the house was yellow, was it?

SHE

Yes, but you needn't be so sarcastic about it. I told you the color of the house quite deliberately. . . . Well, from then on I had a perfect husband. I am certain he went to the house on Brewer Street every day, but he was most considerate and attentive to me, brought me presents, anticipated every wish of mine. I was very happy. And sometimes I made him pay dearly for the way he had treated me before. Now it was I who had the headaches.

HE

Bravo!

SHE

Yes, it was well done. To this day I am rather pleased with myself when I think how by means of a simple address I transformed a bored and indifferent husband into an adoring and ardent lover. . . . But now comes the silliest part of the story. . . . I almost spoiled it all.

HE

How?

SHE

You, who fancy you understand women, haven't, of course, the remotest idea of the great temptation the whole thing held for me.

HE

Temptation? I must confess I don't see.

SHE

It's simple enough. My rôle delighted me so much that I began to regret it was all pretense. The realization that you are a good woman is very solid and comforting, but playing that you are a bad woman gives you the most extraordinary sensation of power. You keep thinking: "Suppose it were true! How thrilling! How amusing!" . . . Do you know what happened to me? An irresistible longing

seized me to look at that house on Brewer Street where my husband watched for me every day. I knew how dangerous it would be ever to let him see me on that street, but the very danger made me all the more keen to go.

HE

And did you go?

SHE

I went. I put on a heavy veil and got into a cab. It was a narrow and dirty little street. As we jolted past number seventeen I peeped out of the cab window. My heart stopped beating. There just opposite the house stood my husband—watching. That is how I found out the house was yellow. I never saw it again. I never wanted to go back. For at the moment when I saw my husband there I experienced an emotion that a good woman rarely feels . . . the horrible and yet thrilling sensation of being caught in an infidelity.

HE

It sounds very amusing. . . . But I should think you'd have chosen a more attractive residence for your imaginary lover. Brewer Street is so——

SHE

It was the first street I happened to think of. And

besides . . . besides . . . it was so conveniently far
from——

HE

From what?

SHE

You lived on Elizabeth Street at the time.

*[He nods. For a long time they sit there
remembering in silence]*

THE END

PHOSPHORUS

PHOSPHORUS

The scene is the living room of a luxuriously furnished apartment in Budapest. It is about seven o'clock in the evening. MADAME is alone, reading the evening paper, when the door is suddenly flung open and the MAID rushes in breathlessly]

THE MAID

Madame! For heaven's sake . . . please . . . come out a minute!

MADAME

What's the matter?

THE MAID

It's mademoiselle—the governess. She's going to kill herself!

MADAME

What's that?

THE MAID

She's dissolving phosphorus in water . . . I saw her. Hurry, please——

[She leads the way to MADEMOISELLE'S room. When they enter they find MADEMOISELLE sit-

ting at a table and softly weeping as she bends over a glass of hot water into which she is industriously chipping the phosphorus heads of matches]

MADAME

[sternly]

What are you doing, mademoiselle?

MADemoisELLE

I'm—oh!

[Bends lower over the table, her face in her hands, sobbing bitterly. The MAID snatches up the glass and the matches and awaits further developments with an eager stare.]

MADAME

You may go, Esther. And take those things with you.

THE MAID

[reluctantly]

Yes, madame.

[She backs out of the room slowly]

MADAME

Now, mademoiselle, what does this mean? Speak!
[MADemoisELLE *only sobs the louder*] Stop that now, and tell me what this means. Do you hear me?

[Failing to get any response from MADEMOISELLE save more violent outbursts of sobbing, MADAME gives it up presently, goes to the door and calls]

Stephan! Send Stephan in here to me!

[A boy of seven comes in, gaping wide-eyed at MADEMOISELLE]

MADAME

Stephan, have you been out with mademoiselle this afternoon?

STEPHAN

Yes, mother.

MADAME

Where?

STEPHAN

In the park.

MADAME

And when did she bring you home?

STEPHAN

A little while ago.

MADAME

What is the matter with her? Do you know?

STEPHAN

No, mother. Maybe the officer hurt her feelings.

MADAME

Officer? What officer?

STEPHAN

Her officer. The one that always waits for us over near the kiosk.

MADAME

Oh, indeed? And was he waiting there today?

STEPHAN

No. Today we got there first. But he came after a while, and then they had a fight.

MADAME

A fight?

STEPHAN

Not right away—later.

MADAME

What happened? Tell me everything you heard.

STEPHAN

We got there, and waited, and after a while the officer came. He's not a cavalry officer, mother, just infantry. Cavalry officers wear boots and spurs and they——

MADAME

Never mind that. What happened?

STEPHAN

First he kissed mademoiselle, and then she kissed him. They always do that. Sometimes he kisses her on the ear—and she pushes him away and says, “It tickles!”

MADAME

Never mind that. I want to know what happened today.

STEPHAN

She said, “It tickles!” today, too. Then we all sat on a bench. And the officer said, “My regiment is to be transferred to Croatia.” And mademoiselle said, “I don’t believe it.” And she asked me if I believed, and I said I didn’t. And mademoiselle got sad and began to cry and scold the officer, and he kissed her on the cheek and on the neck to console her, and mademoiselle said, “That’s all you know; that’s all you can do.”

MADAME

And then what happened?

STEPHAN

Then she cried some more and he kissed her. And she said he was only making it up about Croatia because he was tired of her. And he kissed her again. And she said, “You are all alike, you soldiers.”

MADAME

[*severely*]

Aren't you ashamed of yourself, carrying on that way before a child?

[*But a wail of grief is MADEMOISELLE's only reply*]

STEPHAN

Then the officer told her in German that he did love her. And she answered: "Nicht wahr! Nicht wahr!" They spoke German so I wouldn't understand them. "Nicht wahr" means it isn't true.

MADAME

Go on.

STEPHAN

Then mademoiselle got angry, and she said: "Well, if you must know, I'll be disgraced if you leave me now."

MADAME

[*sharply*]

What? What's that?

STEPHAN

She told him that if he left her she would kill herself because she didn't want to be a mother.

MADAME

[*indignantly*]

Mademoiselle, how could you? How dared you?

You shameless, wicked girl! After I entrusted my boy to your care——

[*MADemoiselle's reply is another paroxysm of sobbing*]

STEPHAN

She said she would kill herself. And the officer tried to kiss her again, but she pushed him away and called him a dirty scoundrel. And she said to me, "Stephan, isn't he a dirty scoundrel?" And I said he was, so the officer gave me a push and tried to kiss mademoiselle again and told her he would send her eighty gulden when he got to Croatia.

[*A wail of anguish from MADemoiselle*]

MADAME

Go on.

STEPHAN

Then the officer went away and mademoiselle and I ran after him. She said: "Aren't you even going to leave me your address?" And he said he would send it to her in a letter. And after he was gone we went to a telephone booth. Mademoiselle telephoned for a long time, and after she came out she said, "You see, Stephan, I knew it was a lie about being transferred to Croatia." Then we came home.

MADAME

That will do, Stephan. You may go.

[*The boy goes out. She turns to MADEMOISELLE*]

Mademoiselle!

MADEMOISELLE

[*rises, drying her eyes, and stands with her face averted from MADAME'S indignant gaze*]

Please, madame——

MADAME

Hold your tongue!

MADEMOISELLE

I only want to explain——

MADAME

Keep your explanations, you abandoned, shameless——

MADEMOISELLE

I'm not, madame. It isn't true—none of it. I only told those things to the officer to—keep—his—love!

[*Begins sobbing again*]

MADAME

Not true?

MADEMOISELLE

Of course not. I made it up. I didn't think he'd have the heart to leave me after I told him that.

MADAME

Oh!

MADEMOISELLE

But he had, you see.

MADAME

Well, if it isn't true, will you kindly explain what all this nonsense with the phosphorus is about?

MADEMOISELLE

That was to test his love. If I drank the stuff it would be in the papers that I had tried to commit suicide. Then he could come to see me in the hospital. I wanted to see if he'd have the heart not to come.

MADAME

I should say there was no doubt about it.

MADAMOISELLE

Well, I've changed my mind now. I'm not going to drink it.

MADAME

I consider that most sensible of you. And now that you have quite decided that you are neither

about to become a mother nor to commit suicide, I feel freer to tell you that you are discharged and that you will pack your things and leave my house at once.

MADemoisELLE

[*sobbing again*]

Mayn't I say good-bye to little Stephan first?

MADAME

Certainly not! Haven't you done enough to contaminate my child with your officers, your lies and your phosphorus? You may consider yourself fortunate that I haven't let my husband deal with you. He would probably have turned you over to the police. So clear out of my house, and be quick about it.

[*She sweeps haughtily out of the room, slamming the door behind her. But in the corridor she pauses and listens. Inside, MADEMOISELLE can be heard pulling out drawers and emptying them while she sings, to herself, low and feelingly, a dolorous refrain about "a heart that yearns, a heart that is breaking"*]

THE END

HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY LOVE

HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY LOVE

Two men are walking in the middle of the road. Here in the suburbs it is very still. A fine mist is swirling over grass and tree-tops, but in the far-off city they can see rows of street lamps, yellow against the darkening horizon, and hear the sound of traffic dim as footsteps in a heavily carpeted room.

THE THICK-SET MAN

[deliberately, dogmatically and with an air of great wisdom]

A woman in love is either spiritual or sensual. No woman can combine both qualities. Titian was right.

THE LEAN MAN

What did Titian say about it?

THE THICK-SET MAN

He painted a beautiful picture called, "Heavenly and Earthly Love." There were two women in it. One was the embodiment of pure, tranquil spiritual-

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ity; the other was wholly a creature of flesh and lust. So it is in life.

[He takes a long, self-satisfied puff of his cigar, having definitely settled that question]

THE LEAN MAN

Do you think so?

THE THICK-SET MAN

I know it. Now I am a common sort of man. My ancestors were peasants. And so my preference is for the woman of flesh. Oh, I can see the beauty of ideal love. Abstractly considered, there is poetry in the poignant contact of two souls. But all that sort of nonsense pops right out of my head the moment my lips come in contact with the warm ardent mouth of a woman. I stop thinking then; I feel.

THE LEAN MAN

Women have taught you that.

THE THICK-SET MAN

How do you mean?

THE LEAN MAN

A man is what women make him. I venture to say—don't be afraid, I shall not be inquisitive—that your sweetheart is sensual, and so you think only of her body. Now the woman I love—don't be

afraid, I shall not be indiscreet—is quite the opposite. I don't know why. Perhaps it's because she is thin. But she has taught me to believe that the affinity of souls, the capacity for true spiritual friendship are the only things that can justify an otherwise sinful relationship.

THE THICK-SET MAN

With thin women.

[He blows a ring of smoke, quite proud of having settled the question once more, this time on the basis of physiology]

THE LEAN MAN

Her love is shy and tender. Our embraces are a thing apart from our love, our kisses a dim dreamy interlude. You may laugh, but when we part—even after the most passionate of our afternoons—we part as brother and sister might—untroubled, chaste, serene.

THE THICK-SET MAN

How different women are! When I part from mine I am the primordial male torn from his mate and she is the primitive female with lips bloody from my kisses and heart in a turmoil of love and jealousy and hatred. Her love is a burning thirst that never can be quenched. *[He puffs his cigar]*

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THE LEAN MAN

If I spoke of mine that way she would never forgive me.

THE THICK-SET MAN

And mine would laugh at your ideas of love. When I was courting her I tried the spiritual stuff—you know how a man feels his way in the beginning—but she would have none of it. To kiss and kiss and embrace and burn! To be ardent and insatiable! That's what she wanted.

THE LEAN MAN

Curious!

THE THICK-SET MAN

Not at all.

THE LEAN MAN

I mean that we each should stand at the opposite extremes of love. You at the sensual and I at the spiritual. Yours the plump pink woman, mine the slender white one.

THE THICK-SET MAN

I wouldn't say she was plump.

THE LEAN MAN

And mine isn't exactly slender.

THE THICK-SET MAN

Mine's neither fat nor thin; she only gives one the impression of being plump.

THE LEAN MAN

Mine's about medium, too, but she gives the impression of slenderness. And I wouldn't call her white either. Rather pale pink.

THE THICK-SET MAN

I suppose mine could be called deep pink.

THE LEAN MAN

Wouldn't it be interesting to see them together? What could two such utterly opposite people find to say to each other? . . . Do you know I have heard of such things in France? . . . Two friends bringing their sweethearts together at a little supper for four. We ought to do it some time.

THE THICK-SET MAN

That wouldn't do. They may know each other.

THE LEAN MAN

That's an idea! Do you suppose they do?

THE THICK-SET MAN

For all we know they may be intimate friends.

THE LEAN MAN

[*blushing*]

I say——

THE THICK-SET MAN

[*guessing what the other is about to propose*]

Yes?

THE LEAN MAN

Look here. . . . You tell me the name of yours
and I'll tell you the name of mine.

[*For a long time they walk in silence. The idea pleases both, but each is wondering whether the other will consider him a cad if he agrees. At last the THICK-SET MAN stops and extends his hand. The LEAN MAN takes it. They look at each other, smiling, then they clasp hands long and fervently*]

THE THICK-SET MAN

[*almost in a whisper*]

Mrs. Jerome Szabo.

THE LEAN MAN

[*regards him, wild-eyed*]

What?

THE THICK-SET MAN

Your turn now.

THE LEAN MAN

Who? Who did you say she was?

THE THICK-SET MAN

Mrs. Jerome Szabo.

THE LEAN MAN

Oh! [*Clutches his arm convulsively*]

THE THICK-SET MAN

Well, what of it?

THE LEAN MAN

She is mine, too.

[*There is an awful silence*]

THE THICK-SET MAN

Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

THE LEAN MAN

Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

[*Another silence*]

THE THICK-SET MAN

And Sundays?

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THE LEAN MAN

[with tears in his eyes]

Who knows?

THE THICK-SET MAN

[bitterly]

And this is the spiritual creature you worship!

THE LEAN MAN

[sorrowfully]

Yes, the sister of my soul, the shy, the tender,
the virginal!

THE THICK-SET MAN

And my primordial mate, the wild, the passion-
ate!

THE LEAN MAN

I could weep.

THE THICK-SET MAN

You could weep because you loved her spiritually,
but I can laugh because that is what she taught me
to do.

*[The one who said he could weep smiles bit-
terly; the one who said he could laugh scowls
tragically]*

THE LEAN MAN

And now what?

THE THICK-SET MAN

I don't know how you spiritual people feel about such things, but we ordinary mortals are revolted at the mere thought of sharing our loves with another. My course is quite clear. I'm through with her.

THE LEAN MAN

And we spiritual people . . . we . . . I don't ever want to look at her again.

[They shake hands]

THE THICK-SET MAN

And yet. . . . I have an idea.

THE LEAN MAN

What?

THE THICK-SET MAN

It is a very good idea. In fact I have never had such a good idea in all my life. Listen to me. She has contrived to make two separate women of herself. There's genius in that, and we should not fail to appreciate it.

THE LEAN MAN

Appreciate it?

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THE THICK-SET MAN

Exactly. As gentlemen we are bound to accept her for what she has made herself. If she is two women, what right have we to consider her one?

THE LEAN MAN

But——

THE THICK-SET MAN

No buts. It is clear as day. This conversation never took place. Everything is as it was. Don't you see?

THE LEAN MAN

[*dubiously*]

Yes.

THE THICK-SET MAN

Agreed then. We will never speak of her again. And she must never know. I will go on being her passionate lover and you her spiritual one. And so we will live happily forever after. Good night.

THE LEAN MAN

Good night.

[*They part abruptly. One goes to the right, the other to the left; but each is wondering how best to supplant the other in the woman's affections and win her for exclusively his own. And both are burning with wounded pride. And tomorrow, when they see the*

woman, both will make a scene; and the woman will send them both about their business and will look for two new lovers. And the woman will be right.]

THE END

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

THE UNPARDONAL SIN

On the terrace of a summer hotel an elderly gentleman is discoursing to a young lady of his bygone love-affairs.

THE LADY

And who was the next?

THE GENTLEMAN

She was the most cruel of them all.

THE LADY

What did she do to you?

THE GENTLEMAN

The most cruel thing a woman can do to a man. . . . According to the poet the unpardonable sin is treason. But that is essentially a man's sin. She committed against me the greatest sin of which woman is capable.

THE LADY

What? What did she do?

THE GENTLEMAN

She told me the truth. [*She stares at him blankly*] Don't you see that the truth from a woman is as reprehensible as treason from a man? But no, you are too young to understand that. Let me explain: I have always had too much money to bother my head about anything but women. While other young men interested themselves in politics, in sociology, in business or in art I lived like a gentleman in a Dumas novel. My youth was spent in an environment of silk and lace, flirtatious eyes and white shoulders, so that when I reached the age of thirty-four I was a past master in the subterfuges of woman. I read them as one reads a printed page, saw through their lies and pretences as one sees through a window. I knew that at fifteen every girl is an accomplished liar, at twenty an ingenious liar, at thirty an habitual one.

THE LADY

Indeed?

THE GENTLEMAN

Indeed. But their lies were wasted on me. It is an invincibility one acquires with time and experience. A series of lessons that gradually sink in. The first is when you say to a girl: "Do you love me?" She answers either "yes" or "no." It took me thirty-four years to fathom the precise signifi-

cance of a woman's "yes" and "no." And to learn that when, for instance, she tells you she has been shopping she really is saying that she has been at tea with a man, and that, since she wants you to believe she was out with another man, she probably wasn't at all. You understand?

THE LADY

No.

THE GENTLEMAN

I knew you would.

THE LADY

But I said I didn't.

THE GENTLEMAN

Yes, I heard you.

[There is a pause]

THE LADY

But this cruel woman—what did she do to you?

THE GENTLEMAN

She saw through me from the first. She realized I was neither a raw youth nor a doting old man but a skeptic whom other women had taught all there was to know. She knew it would not be easy to deceive me.

THE LADY

Yes.

THE GENTLEMAN

In the first months of our friendship she tried. She was a smooth, spontaneous liar. "Who was the man you were with on the street yesterday?" I would ask her. Without an instant's hesitation she would answer: "That was my husband's brother." And later I would ascertain that her husband hadn't a brother. There would be a scene, and at last she would say: "Stop tormenting me. I'll tell you the truth. He was my lover."

THE LADY

And what would you say?

THE GENTLEMAN

I'd laugh and be reassured. And long afterwards I found out he really was her lover. Meantime her stratagem was effective. She would tell me the truth, knowing full well I would never believe her. It was a mean advantage to take of me.

THE LADY

What happened then?

THE GENTLEMAN

It was a bit bewildering. One day she kept me waiting a long time. I asked where she had been so

late. "At Dr. Szirmay's apartment," she told me. And where do you suppose she had been?

THE LADY

Where?

THE GENTLEMAN

At Dr. Szirmay's apartment. And what do you suppose she had been doing there?

THE LADY

What?

THE GENTLEMAN

Looking at his etchings. [*He sighs*]

THE LADY

Yes.

THE GENTLEMAN

And so in time I began to believe everything she told me. Until one day she confided to me that she had visited two gentlemen in a single afternoon. I smiled. "Oho!" I said to myself, "my lady is getting over confident. Having taught me to believe in her veracity, she now begins to slip over a lie here and there to throw me off the track." But I was wrong. That very day I ascertained she had really visited the two gentlemen.

THE LADY

A nice person she must have been!

THE GENTLEMAN

Oh, quite! One of the first families. Attended the court functions, had her hand kissed by ambassadors, and all that sort of thing.

THE LADY

What could her husband have been like?

THE GENTLEMAN

An uncommonly sagacious man. He outwitted us all, though I have often thought it was selfish of him. He died.

THE LADY

Hum! And what was the end of all this truth-telling?

THE GENTLEMAN

My utter bewilderment. The bubble of my self-esteem was pricked. I, who had prided myself that I understood women thoroughly—I, who had flattered myself I could penetrate the most cunningly woven tissue of their lies, now stood revealed to myself as gullible as any boy with his first mistress. The fallacy of my theory was clear to me, though there was little comfort in that. My error had been in assuming that they lied according to a system, whereas——

THE LADY

Whereas?

THE GENTLEMAN

Whereas they follow no system. Now if they were only like an unsystematic man, for instance, their very lack of system might give one the key to their actions. But they are not like that. They are like a systematic woman. . . . Yes, she made me realize my limitations; and with her, as with all the women who came after her, I gave up trying to be clever. Curious, isn't it, that the only woman who ever told me the truth should have paved the way smooth for the lies of all her successors? Still, the experience was not without its compensations; it taught me something valuable.

THE LADY

What?

THE GENTLEMAN

Never to deal with woman by rote and rule. That's a mistake we men are always making. But a woman is never foolish enough to generalize. She never says: "Men are this and that, and one must deal with them thus and so." No, a woman is like a competent driver.

THE LADY

How do you mean?

THE GENTLEMAN

A driver, you see, is forever being called upon to deal with sudden emergencies. Every time he drives his car he is apt to be confronted with a different problem. And he can't solve the same problem twice in the same way. Today he meets a tramcar at a crossing and by increasing his speed is able to pass in front of it; tomorrow, in the same situation, he has to jam on his brakes to keep from smashing into the thing. In short, he must manage his gears and brakes according to the exigencies of the moment. And so with a woman. Each imminent collision is a new problem to her. One she avoids by telling a lie, another by telling the truth.

THE LADY

I don't see why you blame her for that.

THE GENTLEMAN

Blame her? My dear, remember this: A man can forgive a woman who betrays him, tortures him, beggars him, abandons him, but never, never can he forgive the woman who shows him how stupid he is.

THE END

THE KISS

THE KISS

They sit on a bench in a secluded little garden. The sun is just sinking behind the trees. THE YOUNG MAN twirls his straw hat reflectively as he watches THE GIRL, who is toying with the folds of her white dress against her knee. For a long time they have been silent.

THE YOUNG MAN

And there was never anyone . . . before me?

THE GIRL

Never.

THE YOUNG MAN

Not even one?

THE GIRL

Not one.

THE YOUNG MAN

Then I'm really your first . . .

THE GIRL

The very, very first.

THE YOUNG MAN

You darling!

*[He feels this is the propitious moment to
kiss her, but somehow he is afraid]*

THE GIRL

And now will you tell *me* something?

THE YOUNG MAN

Anything. What?

THE GIRL

What about you? Was there anyone . . . before me?

THE YOUNG MAN

[fervently]

Never.

THE GIRL

I am really your first . . . sweetheart?

THE YOUNG MAN

My first . . . and my last. I adore you.

THE GIRL

How old are you?

THE YOUNG MAN

Twenty-two.

THE GIRL

And you never had a sweetheart before?

THE YOUNG MAN

You see, I have always lived at home. I spend most of my time reading and studying. I never go out much. Why, I think you are the first girl I ever met I could talk to without being self-conscious.

THE GIRL

Oh!

THE YOUNG MAN

It's true. You are my first love, and I'm never going to let you go.

[As he speaks he wonders whether this is not the right time to kiss her, but, having decided that it is, he is assailed by a doubt as to whether he hasn't let the propitious moment pass even as he meditated about it]

THE GIRL

Look out! I might construe that as a proposal of marriage.

[There is no doubt about it now. He seizes her suddenly, draws her head toward him and kisses her very gently, first on the inner and then on the outer corner of her eye]

Oh!

[The thing is done. He looks at her most triumphantly, never noticing that she is amazed]

Oh! Well!

THE YOUNG MAN

Why do you say, "Well?"

THE GIRL

You kissed me in such a funny way.

[She puts her hand to the eye that has been kissed]

THE YOUNG MAN

What was funny about it?

THE GIRL

I . . . I . . .

THE YOUNG MAN

Nothing funny about it at all. It was perfectly natural for me to kiss you. I love you.

THE GIRL

Yes, but . . . Oh, now you've spoiled it all.

THE YOUNG MAN

Because I kissed you?

THE GIRL

No, but the way you kissed me. Oh, I could cry!

[Meeting his uncomprehending stare, she changes her tone]

Last Thursday afternoon you were walking on Stephanie Avenue with a woman. Who was she?

THE YOUNG MAN

Why, we spoke to you. You know perfectly well it was Mrs. Choti.

THE GIRL

Yes.

THE YOUNG MAN

Well, what about it?

THE GIRL

And that time on the boat when you sat on a coil of rope in the bow for an hour and a half with a woman. That was Mrs. Choti, too?

THE YOUNG MAN

Why, yes. You were there. You know it was.

THE GIRL

Exactly. And still you say you don't know what I mean.

THE YOUNG MAN

Surely you are not jealous of Mrs. Choti? I swear to you——

THE GIRL

Don't swear. Just kiss me again, exactly as you did before.

THE YOUNG MAN

You darling!

[Unsuspectingly he kisses her again, first on the inner corner of the eye and then on the outer corner]

THE GIRL

That settles it!

[Decisively she pushes him away from her]

THE YOUNG MAN

What did you push me away for?

THE GIRL

I'm through with you.

THE YOUNG MAN

But why? What for?

THE GIRL

Because you are a liar.

THE YOUNG MAN

What? I——

THE GIRL

A liar and a cheat. You've had an affair with Mrs. Choti and it's probably still going on.

THE YOUNG MAN

How can you say such a thing? I assure you——

THE GIRL

Oh, don't trouble to deny it. I'm absolutely certain. And if you'd like to know *how* I know, I'll tell you. My sister and Mrs. Choti are very intimate friends.

THE YOUNG MAN

But——

THE GIRL

Don't interrupt me, please. As I said, this Mrs. Choti is my sister's most intimate friend. She is always coming to our house and making a fuss over me because I am younger and better looking than she is. Secretly, I know, she is jealous of me; but she is such a hypocrite she never misses an opportunity to kiss me. . . . She'll never do it again, I can tell you. I won't even look at her from now on.

THE YOUNG MAN

But——

THE KISS

THE GIRL

She's always kissing me, and whenever she does, you cheat, she kisses me exactly as you did just now. Now what have you got to say?

THE YOUNG MAN

I——

THE GIRL

I won't listen to a word. First she kisses me on the inside corner of the eye and then on the outside corner. She never varies. And that's how you kissed me. There can be no mistake about it. Why, while you were kissing me I could almost hear her catty voice saying, "How perfectly lovely you are today, dear! If I were a man I'd fall in love with you." . . . Well, why don't you say something?

THE YOUNG MAN

Really, I——

THE GIRL

There's no use your denying it. Everybody knows Mrs. Choti's way of kissing. It's an affectation with her. Why, in our family we even have named that sort of kiss "A Mrs. Choti." When we say to one of the kids, "Come and give us a Mrs. Choti," the kid runs right over and kisses you on the eye—inside corner first, outside corner afterwards—and then we all laugh.

THE YOUNG MAN

I'm awfully sorry.

THE GIRL

You ought to be. There you sit telling me I am your first sweetheart, that you never even thought of another girl before. And I believe you and let you take me in your arms, and I close my eyes, expecting to get the first real kiss of my life . . . and what do I get? A Mrs. Choti!

THE YOUNG MAN

I'm sorry, but surely you don't believe that I——

THE GIRL

I couldn't believe it at first. I couldn't believe you such a monster. I told myself it was only a coincidence and asked you to kiss me again. Do you remember what you answered? "You darling!" you said; and you gave me another Mrs. Choti.

THE YOUNG MAN

But on my word of honor——

THE GIRL

Don't. I'm not a fool. Even if I hadn't seen you together with my own eyes no end of times I'd know everything from that kiss. And you had the im-

pertinence to tell me I was the first girl in your life! Married women don't count, I suppose. I've half a mind to write and tell her husband all about it.

THE YOUNG MAN

[*in alarm*]

You wouldn't do that?

THE GIRL

Frightened, aren't you? Now I'm absolutely certain. You coward! I'll write him tonight—
anonymously.

THE YOUNG MAN

I've nothing to be afraid of, but——

THE GIRL

Not that I'm jealous. Or hurt because you deceived me. I know perfectly well you couldn't tell me about Mrs. Choti. There are one or two things I didn't tell you either—one lieutenant and two law students. That's only natural. But you might have been man enough to give me a kiss of your own instead of the affected tricks your mistress had taught you.

THE YOUNG MAN

My mistress! Good Lord, I——

THE GIRL

You worm your way into my confidence; you arouse the tenderest sentiments in me, banish every thought from my head except to wonder whether your kiss will be as thrilling as the lieutenant's and the two law students' were, and then you . . . I shall never forgive you or look at you again.

THE YOUNG MAN

Won't you listen to me? I admit that one evening while I was walking home with Mrs. Choti——

THE GIRL

I'm not interested.

THE YOUNG MAN

She kissed me in fun . . . and I kissed her back . . . once, but really, really there was never anything between us. I swear there wasn't.

THE GIRL

[*over her shoulder, coldly, as she leaves him*]
So you said before.

THE YOUNG MAN

[*to himself, as he walks slowly homeward*]
It's so unjust! I wish there *had* been an affair between Mrs. Choti and me.

THE GIRL

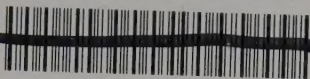
*[writing in her diary that night, concludes
the day's entries as follows]*

"Dear God, please forgive me for inventing the lieutenant and the two law students, but what would You have done in my place?"

THE END OF THE VOLUME

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